Proliferation of information – the good the bad and the ugly

We are in the midst of an exponential growth of access to information. In particular, the development of the Internet has been paralleled by the ease of setting up a blog which assumes some status of authority among the readers and contributors. Now anyone who has access to a computer and the Internet can write on a topic and contribute their viewpoint to a discussion. Apart from the censure of bad or inflammatory language, viewpoints can be displayed freely. This free communication has many advantages and perhaps helps to contribute to the acceptance of a wider range of ideas and tolerance for varying viewpoints.

However, this proliferation of information has introduced new challenges to us. In the past we could consult printed media and, with a relatively high degree of confidence, accept that the information came from a legitimate source. Now one assumes that at one’s peril! Instinctively we have to be more vigilant and interrogate information more carefully. However, I do not see this as a problem, as it encourages us to go back to first principles. As the South African Journal of Sports Medicine is written for health professionals from different disciplines who are attempting to have an evidence-based approach to their work, I thought it was a good idea to revisit some of the first principles which govern our work. An evidence-based approach assumes that the work has a scientific foundation. By definition, a scientific approach is based on logical principles derived from well-controlled experimentation. A feature of this approach is that it should be able to stand up to critical scrutiny. This is how the process of science works, and how knowledge slowly accumulates.

To assist with screening the accuracy of new information I would like to suggest a few questions we can ask ourselves as a reflex action whenever we are evaluating new information:

Does the information portrayed in the article sound too good to be true? For example, does the product discussed promise quick weight loss for nothing? Such a claims may be indicative of a lack of scientific evidence. The information portrayed may be true, but may be misleading or confusing. Does the information make sense? Can it be applied in a logical manner? For example, a study that claims to show a 50% reduction in weight with no exercise or diet changes would be hard to believe. If the results of a study are too good to be true, it is likely that there is a flaw in the methodology or analysis.

Therefore the skills needed by someone trying to critically evaluate a contemporary topic should be refined and developed. Access to information is no longer the limiting factor. Synthesising the information is now the distinguishing factor between someone who has a true understanding and ability to apply the information in an evidence-based way, compared with someone who attempts, but fails to apply their knowledge in an evidence-based way.

We welcome the reader to the first edition of 2009! The goal of this journal is to contribute to the dissemination of information. All papers are peer-reviewed and are required to fulfill requirements which contribute to this goal. This is the first edition in which we have implemented the new guidelines for authors (page 31). We are committed to ensure that the information is communicated in a responsible way. We encourage all the scientists and practitioners involved in health and fitness to contribute to this goal by submitting a paper which may make a contribution. In the past the ability to contribute to the South African Journal of Sports Medicine may have been biased towards academics and scientists. However, we have introduced two new categories (Commentary and Case Studies) which will cater for practitioners who may not be in a position to conduct a formal study. Much of our current knowledge has been ignited by case studies which are sometimes the catalyst for further investigation in a more systematic manner. Just think how gratifying it will be for the author if in the future a research paper or textbook is written on a topic which at present is undefined, but described in a case study published in the South African Journal of Sports Medicine!

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