



**How to:**  
**Focus on the Clinical Question**

**Constructing the question**

One of the fundamental skills for practising Evidence Supported Healthcare is the asking of well built clinical questions. If questions are precisely phrased it will help you search for the evidence to answer the question, whether this is by conducting a literature search yourself or asking a member of library staff for help.

The **PICO** structure can be used to formulate well built clinical questions:

	<b>Tips for focusing question</b>	<b>Example*</b>
<b>Patient or problem</b>	Describe the patient's characteristics, considering all relevant details	"In patients with heart failure from dilated cardiomyopathy who are in sinus rhythm..."
<b>Intervention</b>	State the specific intervention that is being considered	"...would adding anticoagulation with warfarin to standard heart failure therapy..."
<b>Comparison intervention</b>	If relevant state an alternative intervention	"...when compared with standard therapy alone..."
<b>Outcome(s)</b>	Consider what you hope to accomplish, or what may occur	"...lead to a lower mortality or morbidity from thromboembolism. Is this enough to be worth the increased risk of bleeding?"

\*This example of a clinical question is taken from Sackett, D L et al. *Evidence-based medicine. How to practice and teach EBM*. London: Churchill Livingstone, 1997, p. 27

**Determining the type of evidence required**

Once you have followed the PICO structure you can consider what type of question you have created and therefore what type of evidence would provide the most useful answer.

The following are examples of loose matching of question types to the ideal kinds of research for answering them.

- **Diagnosis:** prospective cohort study with good quality validation against "gold standard"

- **Prognosis:** Prospective cohort study
- **Therapy or prevention:** Prospective, randomised controlled trial (RCT)
- **Harm / Aetiology:** RCT, cohort or case-control study (probably retrospective)
- **Economic:** analysis of sensible costs against evidence-based outcomes.

Once you have defined your question carefully you will find that the search for the evidence is easier. The well-formed question makes it relatively straightforward to decide upon and combine appropriate search terms, wherever you choose to search for the information.

### **Useful resources**

- Sackett, D L et al. (2000) *Evidence-based medicine: How to practice and teach EBM*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Churchill Livingstone  
The pocket-sized guide has a section entitled "Asking answerable clinical questions" lots of useful examples are given. Copies are available from the libraries.
- **NICE Evidence Search** is a modern, integrated, hybrid service that aims to be 'the best, most trusted health related knowledge service in the world' Bringing the best available knowledge closer to decision making.  
<http://www.evidence.nhs.uk>
- The **Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP)** is a programme introduced to develop an evidence-based approach in health and social care. CASP aims to enable individuals to develop the skills to find and make sense of research evidence, helping them to put knowledge into practice.  
<http://www.casp-uk.net/>
- The **Centre for Evidence Based Medicine** in Oxford has tips for building clinical questions and some examples of well focused questions  
[http://www.cebm.net/focus\\_quest.asp](http://www.cebm.net/focus_quest.asp)

### **For further help, please contact:**

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