

The need for evidence based practice.

Orthoptics, like all allied health fields, faces increasing pressures for its continued development from both the limited funds within the health system and for recognition from other professions. In this current climate, the issue of evidence based practice has become a catch-cry. This is not at all surprising. As funds decrease, it becomes even more important that proven effective methods of treatment be undertaken. The assumptions of historical precedence can no longer be taken for granted. It is often easier to continue with practices with which we have become comfortable, rather than to question these practices. Inherently questioning our methods makes sense. No professional wishes to have clients engage in treatments without the promise of a positive outcome.

At the same time, Orthoptics and other disciplines have moved into University based curricula. The research based nature of these institutions has lead to increased systematic questioning of both the techniques and the tools traditionally used. This move has met with resistance from students, who often struggle to see the need for research as an active part of their professional life. Research is often seen by both students and professionals, as an activity that is the exclusive domain of a small specialised group within their field. What is often missed is the realisation that evidence based practice, is in reality, another term for research. It is the questioning of all practices aiming for effective outcomes, which can, and should, be practiced by all.

Although at first this concept of research seems daunting, it is in practice occurring all the time. The simplest monitoring of a patient's progress is in itself a form of single case study. Other forms of systematic questioning also lend themselves readily to the clinic based professional, ensuring effective outcomes for patients.

Single Case Studies

As described, each individual patient is in themselves a study. From their measurable improvements, to their subjective comments. In particular, this mode of investigation provides a forum for the individual nature of most client's situations. Reporting both the positive and negative outcomes to the wider community can be of enormous benefit to the profession as a whole.

Group Based Studies

This traditional form of study provides a general outcome for a general problem. For example, is problem A best treated with Treatment B or Treatment C? For most common disorders this technique provides strong evidence for and against techniques and methods as used in the clinic.

Surveys

Often we forget that the best method of finding out information about our clients is to ask them themselves. A simply survey form can ascertain why patients may not be adhering to their treatment regime, or how they feel about the improvements, or lack thereof, that are occurring.

Retrospective Studies

Our filing cabinets are full of important information ready to be found. Though they can be difficult to undertake, due to inconsistent methods of recording, retrospective studies are often an excellent starting point for raising questions about treatment outcomes.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is the evaluation of strategies to determine the effectiveness of the clinical process, both as a whole and in parts, to achieve the best results for the patient. Often, though this evaluation is undertaken, the information is provided as an internal report, when in fact the outcomes have greater implications for the professional community.

Validity and Reliability Studies

Validity is how well a tool measures what it's supposed to measure, whereas reliability is the ability of a tool to give the same measure each time it is used. We often assume that the methods and techniques we use are both reliable and valid, when in fact, little may be known about these properties.

Literature Reviews

This can in itself form a study as such. The historical experiences from within and from without a field can often bare strongly on current practice. An historical review can reinforce your own decision making processes, giving you an insight into how others have approached, the same, or similar problems.

Consideration of the above strategies supports that many health professionals in actuality undertake research in their daily practice which often goes unreported. Changes in individual clinics can sometimes occur without formal reporting, leaving the community as a whole without knowledge of the antecedents of a technique or practice. The final step in any research is the writing and publishing of the work.

We encourage all professionals to submit their findings for publication.

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