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## Workshop on Formulating an Answerable Question

### Formulating a Question as a Basis for Finding Evidence

In this workshop you will be formulating an answerable question. What do we mean by this? Surely all questions are answerable. Well, if I ask ‘Is it worth using an umbrella on a sunny day?’ there would be other questions to ask, to clarify, before answering the question. What do I hope to achieve by using the umbrella, for example? How sunny is it? What do we mean by ‘worth’ (how much benefit would be worthwhile). The same issues apply to clinical questions, so we need to frame our question carefully so that it asks specifically about what we want to know. This is important because the question forms the basis of a search for evidence. If the question is not directly relevant to the clinical scenario, the answer will not be useful.

Please spend only **up to 20 minutes** on each of these 4 stages:

1. Think of a health care-related situation where you would like to find an answer. Examples might include:

- If I have knee pain, is it ok to run?
- Does iridology work?
- How can I avoid jet lag?
- Does homeopathy work?
- How does retinoscopy compare with full refraction results?

You should talk your ideas through with your partner and supervisor, but your health-care situation should be your own.

2. Use the PICO or similar system to phrase your question.
  - PICO stands for Patient, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome. These terms can help you decide on a few words that should be part of your question. *Patient* prompts you to include one or more words that indicate what type of person or problem your question is about (e.g. knee pain); *Intervention* prompts you to include words on the type of treatment, if this is relevant to your question (e.g. melatonin); *Comparison* prompts you to add words indicating any comparison you are interested in (e.g. steroid or other cream that is recommended for dermatitis, Vs homeopathy); *Outcome* prompts the inclusion of one or more words describing how the result of treatment might be measured, such as refraction.



Notice, though, that PICO only really applies when your question is about a treatment of some kind, and one of the example scenarios above is about diagnosis. In this case, we can include a test (diagnostic) method instead of an intervention (in this case, the test method would be iridology). Modified forms of PICO for different types of situations (diagnosis, prognosis) are explained at

<http://www.eboptometry.com/content/optometry/step-1-ask/practitioners-students-teachers/step-1-ask>

3. Once you have some words from your 'PICO' procedure, you can form an answerable question. For example, 'Does iridology work' could become 'Is iridology effective in the diagnosis of [a disease]?' The difference between these questions is that the first one is very vague and does not suggest specific terms that can be used to search for information. The second one is much more specific – it says exactly what you want to know and if you use this as a basis for a search you will be able to find research evidence because research tends to be specific, e.g., testing efficacy on a particular disease.
4. Use the question to decide on a set of key words.
  - Once you have a question, you can use this to decide on a few key words that you will use next week when you are searching for information. The key words are those that indicate the main points about the question, so they exclude generic words such as 'the' or 'of', and include specific words such as 'jet lag' and 'melatonin'.

