



CALIFORNIA'S
VALUED TRUST

Healthcare Benefits for the Education Community

This document is part of California's Valued Trust (CVT) educational series

Be Informed. Be Involved.
Know your health care choices.

This educational series is a resource to help you get good quality health care. For more resources, visit CVT's Web site at www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved.

What is care that “works best”?

Health care that “works best” is care that gets the best results for your health, is safe, and uses health care resources in the most efficient ways. It’s the type of care you want for yourself and your family.

Medical scientists do research to find out which care works best

To find out what types of care work best, doctors and others do **scientific studies of patient care**. The results from this medical research are called “**medical evidence**.”

Each patient is different, but medical research can show whether some types of health care tend to get better results than others for patients with certain conditions. When there is medical evidence from research that shows which care works best, then using that evidence is part of “good quality” care.

What kinds of questions can medical evidence answer?

Medical evidence from research answers questions such as these:

- **What works best for keeping people healthy?** This includes finding out what works best to prevent health problems and what works best to keep diseases from returning.
- **What works best for catching problems at an early stage when treatment can be more effective?**
- **What tests are best for finding out what’s wrong?**

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- **Which treatments help the most and have the fewest side effects?** Some studies collect evidence on experimental treatments, new drugs, or new approaches to surgery, physical therapy, or radiation therapy. Other studies collect medical evidence on the best ways to improve comfort and the quality of life for people with long-term medical conditions.

Some cautions about medical evidence

Medical evidence tells what we know *right now* about what types of care work best for certain types of patients with certain conditions. There are limitations to the evidence that is currently available and there is always more to learn. For example:

- **Some types of conditions and care have been studied, but others have not.** This means that medical research does not always have an answer about which kind of care works best.
- **Depending on how the research was done, the medical evidence might apply to some patients but not others.** For example, evidence that was collected by studying male patients may not apply to female patients. Evidence that comes from studies of adults may not apply to children's care.
- **Medical evidence is always being updated.** Every year, medical research studies are done throughout the world. These studies produce an enormous amount of medical evidence. As researchers do more studies, they learn new things that can cause them to change their conclusions about what works best. This means that medical evidence is always changing and improving.

Using medical evidence to set standards for quality of patient care

When there is enough medical evidence to know what types of care work best, this evidence can be used to set "quality standards" or "guidelines" for good patient care. Care that follows these standards or guidelines is sometimes called "evidence-based care" because it is *based* on the *evidence* that comes from medical research.

- **Quality standards for patient care are created by groups of doctors who are national experts in their field.** To create quality standards, doctors do a careful review of the results from many scientific studies of patient care.
- **Quality standards are created only when doctors feel that there is *enough good evidence*** from enough carefully designed research studies to say that a particular type of care works best. An example is shown below.

A graphic of a spiral-bound notebook with a red cover and a white page. The page contains text about quality standards for surgery. The spiral binding is at the top.

EXAMPLE OF A **QUALITY STANDARD:**

Getting an antibiotic at the *right time* before surgery

Antibiotics are drugs that help prevent and treat infections.

- Research shows that surgery patients who get antibiotics within one hour before their operation are less likely to get an infection of their surgical wound.
- The timing for when patients are given the antibiotic is important. Research shows that the antibiotic does not work as well if patients get it too far in advance or if they get it after their surgery begins.



Therefore, a quality standard for surgery is to make sure surgery patients get an antibiotic at the *right time*, which means getting the antibiotic within one hour before surgery begins.

Here are some things to know about quality standards:

- **Quality standards have been set for some types of care but not for others.** Sometimes standards are not set because there has not been enough research yet or the results from research have been weak or inconsistent. Sometimes standards are not set because experts disagree about what medical evidence means and how to use it for making decisions about health care.
- **Quality standards can change.** Since quality standards are based on the latest medical research, they can change. When new evidence is available, the standards are updated.

Health professionals can use quality standards as *guidelines* for giving good quality care

Doctors and other health professionals can use quality standards as guidelines to help give you good quality care. When doctors use the quality standards as guidelines, it is sometimes called using “**best practices**” for patient care.

To give patients the best care, doctors use their training, experience, and personal medical judgment. **Each patient is different, and doctors take this into account when they use guidelines for quality care.**

- Guidelines are helpful to doctors because they tell what care has been found to work the best for most patients.
- Guidelines are based on good scientific research, but they cannot cover every situation for every patient. In the end, it is up to you and your doctor to decide what care is best for you.

What can **you** do to help make sure you are getting good quality care?

It's important to know that getting good quality care does not happen automatically. While you might tend to assume that all patient care is good quality care, research studies have shown that some care does not measure up to quality standards. For more about this, look for the document titled "Good quality health care: what it is and why you can't take it for granted" at CVT's Web site www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved.

To help make sure that you and your family are getting the care that works best for your condition, you will need to be informed and involved. Below are two examples of what you can do to help make sure you are getting good quality care:

1 You can check to see if the care you are getting is the care that is known to work best

Some information about quality guidelines has been written specifically for patients. You can use this information to check on the care you have been getting.

- For example, a brochure might tell what screening tests and other care you should be getting if you have an ongoing condition such as diabetes, asthma, or heart disease.
- There is also information that compares different treatments and tells which ones work best for certain conditions. This information often includes references to the research studies that were done.



Look for the following documents at CVT's Web site cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved:

- "Information about health care quality: what it is and where to find it."
- "A list of recommended websites that have trustworthy health information."



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The federal Agency for Health Care Research and Quality has produced summaries for patients that tell about effective health treatments for selected conditions (effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov). These summaries are based on expert reviews of medical research. Cochrane Collaboration is an international not-for-profit and independent organization that reviews medical research studies about health care treatments. The website www.cochrane.org has easy-to-understand summaries of the findings of its reviews in the *Cochrane Library*.

A government website (www.guideline.gov) with technical medical information for health professionals includes some links to resources that are written for patients. Click on *Resources* and then click on *Patient Resources Links*.

2 You can use public reports to compare the quality of health plans, hospitals, and other health care providers

If you need to choose a health plan, hospital, nursing home, medical group, or other health care provider organization, there might be a report with information that lets you make quality comparisons. Often, these reports include information that lets you compare health care provider organizations to see how well they are doing at giving patients the types of health care that has been shown to work best.

- One purpose of these public reports with quality comparisons is to give you information to help you decide where to get your care.
- Another purpose is to encourage health care providers to improve the quality of care they provide.

Most public reports with quality comparisons are produced by state or federal government agencies or by large business groups or health care coalitions. They are typically on websites and some are available as printed reports. They are sometimes called *quality report cards*, *quality score cards*, or *performance reports*.

“Hospital Compare” is an example of a report with quality comparisons

The government website called *Hospital Compare* (www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov) has quality information on hospitals throughout the United States.

- You can use this website to compare the quality of hospitals within a state, county, city, or zip code.

- Using information from patients' hospital records, *Hospital Compare* shows how well each hospital is doing at providing the care that is known to work best for patients with certain medical conditions. An example is shown below.

EXAMPLE: **USING A QUALITY STANDARD TO MAKE COMPARISONS**

The federal government's *Hospital Compare* website shows how well hospitals are doing at making sure surgery patients get an antibiotic at the *right time* (within an hour before surgery begins).

▶ This website shows that on average, for hospitals throughout the country, **only 77% of surgery patients were being given antibiotics at the right time.**

- Some of the hospitals have much *better* quality scores (scores that are much higher than 77%).
- Some of the hospitals have much *lower* quality scores (scores that are much lower than 77%).

To find out how well a particular hospital did on this quality standard and other quality standards for hospital care, visit the website at www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov



Besides *Hospital Compare*, here are other government websites with quality comparisons:

- For nursing home care: www.medicare.gov/NHCompare
- For home health care www.medicare.gov/HHCompare
- For kidney dialysis facilities: www.Medicare.gov/dialysis

Source: These materials were adapted from the *Communication Toolkit: Using information to get high quality care*. The American Institutes for Research developed the Toolkit materials with funding from the California HealthCare Foundation. The National Business Group on Health maintains and host the Toolkit website.