

Key Concepts for making informed Choices

An alliance of researchers lays out a framework for taking decisions based on thinking critically about claims and comparisons.

Everyone makes claims about what works. Politicians claim that stop and search will reduce violent crime; friends claim that vaccines cause autism; advertisers claim that natural food is healthy. One group of scientists claims that "deworming" programmes (giving deworming pills to all school children in affected areas) improve school performance and health, calling deworming one of the most potent anti-poverty interventions of our time. Another that deworming does not improve either school performance or health.

Unfortunately, people often fail to think critically about the trustworthiness of claims, including policy makers weighing claims made by scientists. Schools do not do enough to prepare young people to think critically¹. So many people struggle to assess the trustworthiness of evidence. As a consequence, they may not make informed choices.

To address this deficit, we present here a general tool: *Key Concepts for Making Informed Choices* (Table 1, with examples in Box 2). We hope scientists and professionals in all fields will use, evolve and evaluate it. The tool was adapted, drawing on the expertise of two dozen researchers, from a framework developed for healthcare² (Box 1).

Ideally, the Key Concepts for Making Informed Choices should be embedded in education for citizens of all ages. This should be done using learning resources and teaching strategies that have been evaluated and shown to be effective.

Trustworthy evidence

People are flooded with information. Simply giving them more is unlikely to be helpful unless its value is understood. A recent survey in the UK showed that only about a third of the public trust evidence from medical research; about two-thirds trust the experiences of friends and family³.

Not all evidence is created equal. Yet people often don't appreciate which claims are more trustworthy than others; what sort of comparisons are needed to evaluate different proposals fairly; or what other information needs to be considered to inform good choices.

For example, many people don't grasp that things can be associated without one necessarily causing the other. The media sometimes perpetuates this problem by using language suggesting that cause-and-effect has been established when it has not⁴, using statements such as "coffee can kill you", or "drinking one glass of beer a day can make you live longer". Worse, exaggerated causal claims often pepper university and journal press releases⁵.

Studies that make fair comparisons are vital, yet people often don't know how to assess the validity of research. Systematic reviews that synthesise well-designed studies relevant to clearly-defined questions are more trustworthy than haphazard observations; they are less susceptible to biases (systematic distortions) and the play of chance (random errors). Yet results from single studies are often reported in isolation, as facts. Hence the familiar flip-flopping headlines such as "chocolate is good for you", followed the next week by "chocolate is bad for you".

To make good choices, other types of information are needed too — for example about costs and feasibility. Judgements must also be made about the relevance of information from research (its applicability or transferability from one situation to another), and about the balance between the likely desirable and undesirable effects of a drug or therapy or regulation.

When it comes to carbon taxes, for example, policymakers need to consider evidence about their environmental and economic effects, judge how applicable that evidence is, weigh how onerous the administrative difficulties are, model how tax burdens will be distributed across socioeconomic groups, and think about whether the taxes will be accepted in their jurisdictions.

Critical thinking

Individuals and organisations across many fields are working to enable people to make informed decisions. These efforts include synthesizing the best available evidence in systematic reviews; making that information more accessible, for example through plain language summaries or open access; and teaching people how to use such resources. Examples include the Cochrane Collaboration, the Campbell Collaboration, the Collaboration for Environmental Evidence, the International Society for evidence-Based Health Care, the Center for Evidence-Based Management, the Africa Centre for Evidence, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation and the What Works Centres in the UK.

Unfortunately, academics tend to work in silos, missing opportunities to learn from others. The expertise of the authors of this article spans 14 different fields: agriculture, economics, education, environmental management, international development, healthcare, informal learning, management, nutrition, planetary health, policing, social welfare, speech and language therapy, and veterinary medicine.

We have identified many key concepts that apply across these fields (Table 1). Some additional concepts are more relevant in some fields than others. For example, it is often important to consider potential placebo effects when assessing claims about medical treatments and nutrition, but these are rarely relevant with respect to interventions in the environment.

Our collaboration has already prompted many of us to develop frameworks for specific fields and to suggest improvements to the original Informed Health Choices framework ². There is power in identifying an issue that resonates across different domains; it provides the momentum to align efforts.

The Key Concepts for Informed Choices is not a checklist. It is a starting point. Although we have organised the Key Concepts in three groups (*claims*, *comparisons* and *choices*), it can be used to develop learning resources that include any combination of these, presented in any order. We hope it will prove useful to people helping others to think critically about what evidence to trust and what to do, including those teaching critical thinking and those responsible for communicating research findings.

Next steps

Evidence-informed practice is now taught to professionals in many different fields, and these efforts must grow. It is also vital that school children learn the Key Concepts, rather than

delaying acquisition of these skills until adulthood. Children who have been explicitly taught critical thinking make better judgements than those who have not⁶. Early education sets an important foundation for teaching time-pressed adults.

An important part of the work of encouraging critical thinking is learning and sharing strategies for promoting healthy scepticism while avoiding unintended adverse consequences. Possible unwanted consequences include inducing nihilism; allowing for disingenuous claims that uncertainty is a defensible argument against action (on climate change, for example); or encouraging false beliefs that competing interests among those promoting interventions renders all research untrustworthy.

Competing interests take different forms in different fields, but the challenges and remedies are similar: recognition of competing interests, transparency, and independent evaluations. Achieving these depends on improved public understanding of the need for evaluation, and public demand for investment in independent evaluations, as well as unbiased communication of evaluation findings.

Further development and specialization of the *Key Concepts for Informed Choices* is needed, and we welcome suggestions. For example, further consideration needs to be given to how these concepts can be applied to system-wide changes, such as mitigation of the effects of climate change or adaptation to environmental change, taking into account complex, dynamic interactions and feedback loops.

To facilitate further development, we have created a website (www.thatsaclaim.org) where the Key Concepts can be adapted to different fields and target users, translated into other languages, and linked to learning resources.

References

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Randomised trial

Kids taught health tool in Uganda pass test

The [Informed Health Choices](#) (IHC) Project was initially developed between 2012 and 2017 by a collaboration including some of the co-authors of this article (Andy Oxman, Astrid Dahlgren, Iain Chalmers, and Matt Oxman). It includes its own set of Key Concepts², learning resources, and a database of multiple-choice questions to assess how well users can apply the concepts.

In 2016, a randomized trial involving 120 schools and over 10,000 school children in Uganda showed that this resource improved the ability of 10- to 12-year-old children to apply 12 of the Key Concepts⁷. These concepts included, for example, recognising that personal experiences alone are an insufficient basis for claims about effects, and that small studies can be misleading. In this trial, 69% of school children who were taught the Key Concepts passed a multiple-choice test of their ability to think critically about health claims, compared to just 27% of the school children not taught the Key Concepts.

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Box 2. Key Concepts in Action

Claims

Key Concept: *Beliefs alone about how interventions work are not reliable predictors of the presence or size of effects of interventions.*

Most people would intuitively say that it is hard to influence parents' engagement with their children's education. The common-sense assumption is therefore that more intensive (and more costly) interventions would be more likely to be effective. However, studies of intensive interventions have often failed to show effects on pupils' attainment, as measured with standard tests⁸. Meanwhile, a recent evaluation of the effects of simply texting parents weekly with updates about their child's schooling had positive effects on children's attendance, homework submission, and mathematics attainment⁹. These effects were small, but the cost was very low. This illustrates that—contrary to intuitive reasoning— inexpensive interventions can be helpful, and expensive ones can fail.

Comparisons

Key Concept: *Comparison groups (or conditions) should be as similar as possible.*

“Scared Straight” programmes take young offenders on prison visits on the assumption that this experience and listening to inmates' descriptions of life in prison will deter juvenile delinquency. Before-after comparisons have found that such prison visits were followed by large reductions in delinquent behaviour. But a lot can change within a group of youngsters over time, including becoming older and more mature. How can anyone know that the prison visits caused the reduction? Fairer comparisons of prison visits were done in which youths were randomly assigned either to visit prison or not, thus creating groups of youths who were more comparable. Comparisons between these two groups showed *greater* subsequent delinquent behaviour in the youngsters who had been exposed to prisons than in those who had not^{10, 11}. The before-after comparisons, lacking similar comparison groups, were misleading.

Choices

Key Concept: *When there are important uncertainties about the effects of interventions, those uncertainties should be reduced by (further) fair comparisons.*

Performance-based financing schemes—where funds are released only if a specific action is taken or performance target met—have become popular in the health sector. Billions of dollars have been invested in promoting these schemes in low- and middle-income countries, with the aim of achieving international development goals¹². For example, health providers have been offered financial incentives to increase the percentage of births in institutions (instead of at home), with the intention of improving maternal and newborn health and survival. However, performance-based financing schemes can have unintended adverse effects, such as encouraging health care workers to falsify records, or to neglect non-incentivized activities. In Tanzania, this scheme prompted some health facilities to threaten new mothers with fines or denial of vaccinations for their children. Where there is so much uncertainty about both the beneficial and adverse effects of an intervention, further fair comparisons should be done before or while rolling out such schemes.

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