Author's response to reviews

Title: A Philosophical Analysis of the EBM Debate

Authors:

Prof Scott R Sehon (ssehon@bowdoin.edu)
Dr Donald E Stanley (dstanley@tidewater.net)

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PDF covering letter
Dear Editor,

We are submitting an article for consideration by *BioMed Central Health Services Research* entitled, “A Philosophical Analysis of the EBM Debate”.

The project undertaken within the article may appear somewhat unusual for a medical journal, so we believe that it is worth some brief explanation. There has been considerable debate about the nature and value of evidence-based medicine (EBM), and this debate in turn raises fundamental questions about how medicine ought to be practiced. Unfortunately, the debate has often been conducted in a rather unclear and unhelpful way. In particular, some proponents of EBM have tended to characterize EBM so broadly and vacuously that it would be hard to find someone who ever disagreed with EBM. At the same time, proponents of EBM also cite the work of Thomas Kuhn, and portray EBM as a radical “paradigm shift.” In the first two sections of our discussion, we try to present a clearer account of EBM, and we argue that it is a serious mistake to see EBM as a paradigm shift. This requires explanation of the philosophical concepts involved, but we believe that the discussion is necessary for clearing away the damage done by loose talk of paradigm shifts.

In the third and fourth sections, we suggest that it is much more fruitful to understand the relationship between EBM and its alternatives in light of a different philosophical metaphor: W.V. Quine’s metaphor of the web of belief. Since Quine’s work is presumably unfamiliar to the readers of *BioMed Health Services Research*, we begin by explaining certain aspects of his view that are most relevant to the EBM debate. We then move to a detailed discussion of the relation between EBM and the alternatives in light of Quine’s picture of scientific knowledge. This part involves a much longer excursion into philosophical territory than one would normally see in a medical journal, but we are convinced that philosophical analysis helps greatly in understanding the difference between EBM and the alternatives, and it thus leaves the reader in a much better position to evaluate effectively the question of how medicine ought to be practiced.

As submitted, the paper itself is approximately 6600 words (7200 words if one includes the abstract, references, etc.). The length could be brought down somewhat, though perhaps at some cost in the clarity of our exposition of the philosophical concepts.
The contents of these articles have not been published, nor are they being submitted elsewhere. Both authors listed (myself and Dr. Donald Stanley) meet the qualifications for authorship, and there is no one else who meets the qualifications. There are no conflicts of interest for either author. I will be the corresponding author, and my full address is:

Scott Sehon  
Department of Philosophy  
Bowdoin College  
8400 College Station  
Brunswick, ME 04011-8484

Sincerely,

Scott R. Sehon  
Associate Professor of Philosophy