

# The Well-Built Clinical Question

## The Process

<b>The Patient</b>	<b>1. Start with the patient: a clinical problem or question arising out of the care of the patient.</b>
<b>The Question</b>	<b>2. Construct a well-built question derived from the case.</b>

The well built clinical question always begins and ends with the patient. To begin the process, consider the following scenario

### Anatomy of a good clinical question

#### 1. Patient or problem

How would you describe a group of patients similar to yours? What are the most important characteristics of the patient? This may include the primary problem, disease, or co-existing conditions. Sometimes the sex, age or race of a patient might be relevant to the diagnosis or treatment of a disease.

#### 2. Intervention, prognostic factor, or exposure

Which main intervention, prognostic factor, or exposure are you considering? What do you want to do for the patient? Prescribe a drug? Order a test? Order surgery? What factor may influence the prognosis of the patient? Age? Co-existing problems? What was the patient exposed to? Asbestos? Cigarette smoke?

#### 3. Comparison

What is the main alternative to compare with the intervention? Are you trying to decide between two drugs, a drug and no medication or placebo, or two diagnostic tests? Your clinical question does not always need a specific comparison.

#### 4. Outcomes

What can you hope to accomplish, measure, improve or affect? What are you trying to do for the patient? Relieve or eliminate the symptoms? Reduce the number of adverse events? Improve function or test scores?

The structure of the question might look like this:

<b>Patient / Problem</b>	tobacco stained teeth, adults
<b>Intervention</b>	Colgate Whitening
<b>Comparison, if any</b>	Colgate Total
<b>Outcome</b>	Teeth are at least 2 shades of lighter after one month of use

For the patient, the clinical question might be:

In adults with tobacco stained teeth, does using **Colgate whitening** toothpaste 3 times a day compared to using regular **Colgate Total** result in at least 2 shades of lightening after one month of use

Two additional elements of the well-built clinical question are the **type of question** and the **type of study**. This information can be helpful in focusing the question and determining the most appropriate type of evidence.

The most common types of questions related to clinical tasks are:

- Diagnosis** how to select and interpret diagnostic tests
- Therapy** how to select treatments to offer patients that do more good than harm and that are worth the efforts and costs of using them
- Prognosis** how to estimate the patient's likely clinical course over time and anticipate likely complications of disease
- Harm/Etiology** how to identify causes for disease (including iatrogenic forms)