



Australian Prescriber



AN INDEPENDENT REVIEW

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Are guidelines good for doctors?

Medical guidelines are drawn up to help doctors choose appropriate treatments for their patients. However they may also be used as standards to measure or assess doctors' quality of care, according to a leading medical academic.

Professor Chris Del Mar, Director of the University of Queensland's Centre for General Practice, writing in the latest issue of *Australian Prescriber*, examines the nature and use of guidelines.

"Guidelines have changed their function from being something designed to assist clinicians in managing patients, to become a standard," Professor Del Mar said.

Professor Del Mar said guidelines were useful not only to doctors in their treatment of patients, but also as benchmarks to make judgements about the doctors' standard of care.

"Standards can be set at several levels, each with its own uses. Minimal standards can be used to identify health professionals who perhaps require remedial or even punitive action. Exemplary standards aim to encourage the whole profession to improve."

Professor Del Mar said it was clearly important to recognise what guidelines were being used for. Sometimes the best treatment for a patient is outside the guidelines.

"General practitioners are experts at finding the right treatment for their patients. This involves taking account of their psychosocial factors and welding different pieces of information together to make a decision," he said.

"Being sensitive to these issues may actually be a sign of very good quality care. Patients' views may be as important as the evidence on which guidelines are based, when deciding what treatment to prescribe," Professor Del Mar said.

For a copy of the complete article or information about *Australian Prescriber*, visit the homepage http://www.australianprescriber.com/public_html/default.htm or phone 02 6289 7038.

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This national independent review of therapeutic topics is designed to assist health professionals in their duties. The journal provides independent comment - no advertising is accepted. Among other articles, the current issue of *Australian Prescriber* also looks at irritable bowel syndrome, and late-life depression.