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The power and poverty of information
What proportion of all the material published each year that might help you do your job better do you actually read? Few people will answer more than 50%, and many will answer less than 10%. There is lots of information that might help us, but much of it we never find; and lots we haven't time to read even when we can find it. Worse, being human, we spend time reading information that is of no use to us in our jobs but which amuses, gratifies, fascinates, or infuriates us. The BMJ trades on those human foibles (particular in this week of our book supplement), but we are also interested in the increasing effort to present information to doctors and others in ways that will be useful to them.

T Fahey and others look at purchasers' willingness to buy a medical intervention when the results of a trial of mammography and a systematic review of cardiac rehabilitation were presented in different ways (p 1056); relative risk reduction, absolute risk reduction, proportion of event free patients, and the number of patients needed to treat to prevent an adverse event. Doctors tend to be more impressed by the big changes of relative risk reduction (34% for mammography, 20% for cardiac rehabilitation) than by the smaller numbers of absolute risk reduction (0-06% for mammography, 3% for cardiac rehabilitation), and the purchasers responded in just the same way.

A paper by Patrick White and others investigates the effect of giving general practices feedback on their patients with asthma (p 1065). Practices were randomised to receive feedback or not—and, sadly, providing feedback had no effect on the morbidity of patients with asthma or on the number prescribed inhaled steroids. "Even," the authors conclude, "where information seems to be intrinsically powerful, as in the patient derived information used in this study, it is unlikely in itself to bring about change. Will the information superhighway, when we will be exposed to a firehose of information, have any greater effect? Almost certainly not."