

ASK FOR EVIDENCE

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Every day, we hear claims about what is good for our health, bad for the environment, how to improve education, cut crime, and treat disease. Some are based on reliable evidence and scientific rigour. Many are not. Where there is regulation of misleading information, in advertising or trading standards for example, regulators are overworked and overwhelmed removing claims and making corrections. With small tweaks, the same claims crop up again and again and every time one is debunked another pops up – like a game of whack-a-mole.

What are groups like patient support forums supposed to do when people pose as members to promote unproven treatments – police every post made on their forums? That probably wouldn't work, even if we

*... like a game of
whack-a-mole ...*

wanted it to. Surely the only way is to immunise people against misleading information.

So how can we make companies, politicians, commentators and official bodies accountable for the claims they make? If they want us to vote for them, believe them, or buy their products,



then we should ask them for evidence, as consumers, patients, voters and citizens. If we don't ask for evidence, people and companies will get away with making misleading claims.

At Sense About Science we know the cost of false claims. Take the husband of a multiple sclerosis sufferer who told us that he wished he'd known the questions to ask a clinic offering unproven stem cell treatments.



He might have spent the thousands of pounds, and the last few months of his wife's life, on a holiday instead of chasing false hope.

We've launched an Ask for Evidence campaign to

It's not just a way of protecting yourself, or your constituents, from misleading claims. It's also an opportunity for organisations to show they are based on the best available evidence, or that they aspire to be. NHS Choices

... accountable for the claims they make ...

encourage everyone, every consumer, citizen and patient, to ask for evidence on claims they encounter. This is Sense About Science working with the public, to park their tanks on the lawn of those who seek to influence us. And it's starting to work.

quickly updated its advice on washing reusable nappies when it was asked for evidence by the Nappy Science Gang – it turns out there's no evidence that you should only be using non-bio

... claims are being withdrawn ...



The campaign has seen people ask a retail chain for the evidence behind its MRSA resistant pyjamas; ask a juice bar for the evidence behind wheatgrass detox claims; ask the health department about rules for Viagra prescriptions; ask for the studies behind treatments for Crohn's disease, and

detergent. It's brilliant that a group of mums can change the policy of such a huge organisation simply by asking for evidence.

Sometimes evidence isn't clear cut. In fact it's pretty common for there to be some degree of uncertainty. Network Rail was asked for evidence about a pilot

... a company happy to have a conversation ...

hundreds more. As a result, claims are being withdrawn, bodies held to account and those who are championing the good use of evidence are being held up as examples to the rest.

they were planning to launch to see if installing blue lights in stations could reduce suicides. Network Rail was open and honest about the gaps in the evidence. They responded that although there were significant

questions around the original research on which they were basing these pilots – including whether they accounted for suicides that occurred during the daytime when the lights might

engage with the public. This year, people on AskforEvidence.org have made over 1,000 requests for evidence, and it has had over 190,000 visitors. The campaign



not have been on – the intervention was relatively cheap and based on robust evidence about blue light affecting mood. Network Rail was keen to test whether blue lighting could have any effect on what is a significant problem on our rail network. It was great to see a company happy to have a conversation about what the evidence does and doesn't tell us.

is supported by hundreds of public figures, organisations and thousands of supporters such as Mumsnet, NHS Behind the Headlines and the Royal Statistical Society. The campaign has received core funding from The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the website was built thanks to support from the Wellcome Trust.

The more people ask for evidence, the more people

... supported by hundreds of public figures ...

It has been fascinating to see what issues people care about, from nappies to railways, weight-loss pills to national policies on agriculture. When you start from a position of what people care about, it's a relatively simple step for people to be enthused about discussing evidence and what that does and doesn't look like. AskforEvidence.org has grown into a national platform for people to get help with science and evidence questions, and for scientists and scientific organisations to meaningfully

expect to be asked. And that's a good thing because it's in the public interest to be spending public money in a way that is based on the best available evidence. Or at least taking account of what the evidence says.

Dr Chris Peters is the scientific liaison at Sense About Science and coordinates the Ask for Evidence campaign which seeks to raise the level of expectation for evidence society.