

Bufala spotting
How to make evidence-based medicine work
for you and for vaccines

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Introduction

During the year busy librarians and healthcare workers have little time for reading or reflecting, a fact conflicting with the need to keep up to date with what is going on in medicine and to track the avalanche of paper, sound and electronic inputs we receive. The obvious starting point is a topic of interest. We also need to select something which has some kind of credibility, either scientific or ethical or both (some tell me there is no difference between the two).

So how can we reconcile the contrasting requirements of selecting uptodate good, reliable knowledge from a huge offer and very limited reading time?

The book

Some time ago I published a book called “Attenti alle Bufale” (“Beware of red herrings”, in Italian). In italian slang bufale are red herrings but in real life bufale are female water buffaloes. Their milk is the basic ingredient of the famous mozzarella cheese (mozzarella di bufala). Apart from the obvious reasons for writing a book (very poor returns) my motive was to publish a series of basic quick instruments based on my experience as an Evidence Based Medicine (EBM) Cochrane researcher. I have been conducting systematic reviews for 15 years and know that up to 95% of the studies I read or the information that comes my way is of doubtful value. The reasons and techniques to distort science used in modern health communication are described in detail in Attenti alle Bufale.

The instruments in turn had two functions. First I wanted to help folk who realise that a very high percentage of what we read or hear is a bufala, to spot the bufale and put them where they belong, thereby limiting the intellectual damage. Second I wanted to try to make EBM relevant to busy healthcare workers who have little time (www.attentialebufale.it). Third, but not least, I wanted to protect patients (through the intermediary of the doctors and nurse who look after them) from being used simply as consumers of health products.

I called the chapter presenting the instruments “Bufala spotting” and structured it in the following manner. For each type of communication (lecture, editorial, research paper etc) I described a quick version of the instrument, designed to be applied in two minutes by looking for critical points such as the presence of a conflict of interest statement. Next I described a longer and more detailed version for folk who have more time (a lot more time in some cases). I then explained the rationale for my approach. Next to each section I placed a number of bufala heads to signify the danger of being taken for a bufala ride: four bufala heads mean extreme danger, one bufala head means low danger.

Finally I issued some basic health warnings so that readers did not take the content as absolute gospel and approached the issue with what I think is the right mentality:

- everything and anything we read or hear in biomedical sciences has to be approached critically. This is the fastest and most reliable universal instrument. Trust but verify, as Ronald Reagan used to say. A critical mentality is developed and nurtured, it does not grow overnight.
- all quick instruments work, but you only have my word for it. True, I have read thousands of papers, reviews, editorials etc critically but it is still only one man’s experience. I have no references to offer for the quick instruments, but some of the elaborate ones have been validated and are beginning to make an impact on the quality of published science.
- if you do not want to bother typing in all the URLs of the full instruments, visit www.attentialebufale.it, where you have quick drill-through links to the various links.

- finally if you do not like what I am about to propose, develop your own instruments. If you do, try it. Either way, let us know what you think.

I regret that a Spanish version of the book and website is not yet available, but Italian and Spanish are similar enough to be able to grasp the sense of the content.

The website

You can not visit the content of the website which has 5 main windows. The first described the book, its author and contains international media clips of both author and book. The second window reports the films that are cited in the book to lighten the message and entertain readers, included the all-time Spanish classic “La Noche del Terrore Ciego”.

The third and fourth windows deal with the issue of quality of scientific information and has the bufala spotting the instruments, links, interviews and the back issue of the monthly newsletter that we produce, and the fifth is a game to teach people how to gain a high impact factor cheating.

There are also mobile phone ringtones (bufale and chickens with avian flu), a window to subscribe to the newsletter and a countdown to the next pandemic.

Visit the site and let me know what you think. Who knows you may even want to buy the book.....