

TESTING TREATMENTS

Chapter 6

6 Fair tests of treatments

The principles underlying fair tests of treatments may not be familiar to many readers, but they are not complicated. In fact, much of our everyday, intuitive grasp of the world depends on them. Yet they are not taught well in schools and are often needlessly wrapped up in complex language. As a result, many people shy away from the subject, believing that it is beyond their ability to comprehend. We hope this and the following two chapters will persuade you that you are actually already aware of the key principles, and so will readily understand why they are so important. Readers who would like to explore these issues in more detail will find additional material at www.testingtreatments.org and in *The James Lind Library* (www.jameslindlibrary.org).

WHY ARE FAIR TESTS OF TREATMENTS NEEDED?

Nature, the healer

Many health problems will tend to get worse without treatment, and some will get worse in spite of treatment. However, some get better by themselves – that is, they are ‘self-limiting’. As one researcher involved in testing a proposed treatment for the common cold put it: ‘if a cold is treated energetically it will get well in seven days, while if left to itself it will get well in a week.’¹ Put more cynically, ‘Nature cures, but the doctor takes the fee.’