The primary purpose of the NHS is ‘... to secure through the resources available the greatest possible improvement to the physical and mental health of the nation’. To achieve this, decisions about the delivery and provision of healthcare are increasingly being driven by evidence of clinical and cost-effectiveness as well as systematic assessment of actual health outcomes.

Evidence-based medicine (EBM) is the process of systematically reviewing, appraising and using clinical research findings to aid the delivery of optimum clinical care to patients.

Increasingly, purchasers are looking to the strength and weight of scientific evidence on clinical practice and cost-effectiveness when allocating resources. They are using this information to encourage healthcare professionals and NHS trusts to use treatments that have been proven to be both clinically and cost-effective, while disinvesting from practice that does not meet these objectives.

EBM forms part of the multifaceted process of assuring clinical effectiveness, the main elements of which are:

- Production of evidence through research and scientific review
- Production and dissemination of evidence-based clinical guidelines
- Implementation of evidence-based, cost-effective practice through education and management of change
- Evaluation of compliance with agreed practice guidance through clinical audit and outcomes-focused incentives.