**Knowledge — how we think we know things**

A friend of mine is fond of saying ‘I don’t believe in facts, facts change’. But is that a fact? There are all sorts of difficulties about knowing things. Here are three.

**The problem of perception**

Immanuel Kant stated:

> As the senses never enable us to know things in themselves, but only their appearances, all bodies must be held to be nothing but mere representations in us, and exist nowhere else than merely in our thought.

We have no God-like comprehension of the billions of particles around us. We do not experience the curvature of space, the mutability of time. We cannot know the world. We can only know about the world through our senses.

And the senses do not report directly to our conscious mind. They are filtered, interpreted and modified by an active process of perception, a process through which our mind constructs preliminary internal models out of sensory data. The beautiful and natural image of the world in our conscious mind is constructed within our brains from a huge body of digital data from the sensory nerves.

It is not the real world.

**Which model of reality?**

Kant also states that ‘intuitions without concepts are blind’. By ‘intuitions’ he means individual pieces of sense data. By ‘concepts’ he means what we would call theories or models. Kant’s view is that our understanding of all sense data depends on the theories that we hold about the context of the data.

Einstein stated ‘theory cannot be fabricated out of the results of observation ... it can only be invented’. Our observations and theories cannot ever be accepted as a final objective truth, but must remain open to doubt and reformulation. All knowledge is provisional.

**Box 1. Reflective notes**

- Do you agree with Kant’s challenging views about how we can know things?
- How much have medical ‘facts’ changed in our professional lifetime? How much does it matter?
- How critical are we when presented with new knowledge?
- ‘In medicine, people matter more than facts’ — discuss.

**Box 2. Further reading**

**Primary source**


**Further study**

Do give Kant a try, but you may find Warburton’s explanation of Kant more accessible: Warburton N. Philosophy, the Classics. London: Routledge, 1998, Ch 10.