

Recommended information sources

In this 14th article in a series on complementary medicine, **Edzard Ernst** discusses the need for reliable sources of information and suggests useful texts for practising pharmacists who need to be able to find answers quickly

Considering the popularity of complementary medicine (CM), the abundance of misleading information (eg, in the daily press) and the lack of knowledge many pharmacists profess to have in this area, one can draw a simple conclusion: UK pharmacists have some catching up to do if they want to fulfil the need to advise their patients and customers responsibly.

The conclusion may be simple but the solution is not. Where can one find reliable information on CM? One has to be realistic — pharmacists are usually too busy to read large volumes of text. They require quick and dependable references that are readily available when information is needed in a hurry.

What information? Colourful explanations about the origins, history or philosophy of CM are not what most pharmacists will look for. Foremost, they need to know what the evidence in relation to efficacy and risks is, and they require these data in a factual, no-nonsense format.

The “official” UK guide

How does the “official” UK guide compare against these elementary criteria? This guide is called “Complementary medicine: information for primary care groups” (available at: www.doh.gov.uk). It is produced by The Prince of Wales’s Foundation for Integrated Health. Financially supported by the Department of Health, the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly, it was recently distributed across the UK. The guide aims to provide “a basic source of reference on the complementary and alternative therapies most commonly provided”, and covers acupuncture, aromatherapy, chiropractic, homoeopathy, hypnotherapy and osteopathy. However, much of the factual information contained in its pages is incorrect and incomplete. For instance, readers are never told when research suggests a treatment to be ineffective. Only when the results are positive are they included. Similarly, readers learn almost nothing regarding adverse effects — even potentially lethal complications are not mentioned. In one sentence, the guide reads like a promotional brochure aimed not at reliably informing but at brainwashing the public.

Commendable sources

The lack of reliable information for consumers only increases the burden for pharmacists to inform their clients responsibly. Several books offering the information required are available. There is a basic choice between several specialised books (eg, on herbal medicine) and books that cover the entire area of CM. A personal selection of

Examples of reliable books on complementary medicine

Book	Comment
<i>Herbal medicine</i> Barnes J, Anderson LA, Phillipson DJ. Herbal medicines. London: Pharmaceutical Press; 2002.	Informative monographs on about 150 medicinal plants. The target audience is pharmacists.
Der Mardersosian A. The review of natural products. St Louis, Missouri, US: Facts and Comparisons; 2001.	This contains concise monographs of approximately 300 medicinal plants.
Ulbricht CE, Basch EM (editors). Natural standard herb and supplement reference. Evidence-based clinical reviews. St Louis, Missouri, US: Elsevier Mosby; 2005.	This contains detailed information, including some clinical data, and is written by pharmacists.
Jellin JM, Gregory P, Batz F, Hitchens K (editors). Pharmacist’s letter/prescriber’s letter natural medicines comprehensive database. 3rd ed. Stockton, CA: Therapeutic Research Faculty; 2000.	A comprehensive reference book on medicinal plants and other natural substances.
Fugh-Berman A. The 5-minute herb and dietary supplement consult. Lippincott, Philadelphia; 2003.	A good reference text. Written by a doctor for doctors and other health care professionals.
<i>Herb-drug interactions</i> Herr S. Herb-drug interaction handbook. Nassau, NY: Church Street Books; 2002.	An informative reference text with a narrowly defined focus.
<i>All areas of complementary medicine</i> Ernst E, Pittler MH, Stevinson C, White A. The desk top guide to complementary and alternative medicine. Edinburgh: Mosby; 2001.	This focuses on the clinical essentials, specifically written for busy clinicians.
Jonas WB, Levin JS. Essentials of complementary and alternative medicine. Philadelphia: Lippincott; 1999.	Not sufficiently concise for a quick and useful reference text.
Oken BS. Complementary therapies in neurology. New York: Parthenon; 2004.	An informative book but with a narrow focus.

recent texts that are likely to be useful for pharmacists is given in the Panel.

The internet

There is also a plethora of websites on CM. The vast majority is commercially orientated and of pitiful quality. Many not only mislead their readers but have considerable potential to do harm.¹ Several websites that stand out for being evidence-based and more reliable than the rest have been listed previously (*PJ*, 1/8 January, p21).

The Cochrane database is, of course, well-known to many pharmacists. It now contains numerous systematic reviews of complementary therapies. There is little doubt that Cochrane reviews are of high quality and reassuringly independent.

For pharmacists with a more than fleeting interest in CM, I would like to mention *Focus on Alternative and Complementary Therapies* (FACT). This reviews and critically comments on new CM research published worldwide and thus saves time and money for all who want to be regularly informed. This journal is now available online (available at

www.pharmpress.com/fact) which significantly increases its value for pharmacists. However, I should declare an interest as I am editor of *FACT*.

Conclusion

Reliable information on CM is not easy to find. The “official” UK guide is of disappointing value. Several dependable books and websites do, however, address the pressing need for reliable, evidence-based information. All pharmacists who sell CM products should feel the need for reliable information on this often complex and fast-evolving subject.

References

- Schmidt K, Ernst E. Assessing websites on complementary and alternative medicine for cancer. *Annals of Oncology* 2004;15:733–42.

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