

Review of Herb & Supplement Handbook

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Herbal medicinals are used by approximately 20% of adults and 10% of children who present for anesthesia. Currently, there is no single resource that provides a comprehensive and evidence-based approach to the most commonly used herbals. With the publication of The Natural Standard Herb & Supplement Reference Book: Evidence-based Clinical Reviews and Herb & Supplement Reference Handbook: The Clinical Bottom Line by CE Ulbricht and EM Basch, an outstanding resource that provides a very readable, balanced and scientific analysis of the literature on herbal medicinals is now available for clinicians as well as laypersons. The Reference Book contains 1040 pages that are packed with essential information on 98 of the most commonly used herbal medicinals. The Reference Handbook is the smaller, pocket companion to the Reference Book, that contains 1008 pages, with essential information on 91 commonly used herb medicinals. The Natural Standard research collaboration that edited these monographs can be found at the following website: www.naturalstandard.com. Both books are available through the website, as is a large volume of supplementary information on specific herbal medicinals.

Both the Reference Book and the Handbook have a similar structure and content, except for a few minor differences. Accordingly, the comments that follow apply equally to both monographs.

The editors of these monographs recruited an impressive array of experienced investigators and well-known authors from a wide range of backgrounds including traditional medicine, pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals and complementary medicine to contribute written material. The contributors compiled an evidence-based analysis of the efficacy of the herbals, in addition to lists of indications, interactions, side effects and complications for each of the herbals. Although the monographs include a small sample of the more than 2000 herbal medicinals available world-wide, these almost 100 herbals represent the most commonly used herbals and therefore those herbals that we are most likely to encounter in clinical medical practice.

The Introduction section of most books is often read cursorily, if at all, but in these monographs, this section bears importance, particularly for those who are not familiar with evidence-based approaches to clinical data. The Levels of Evidence used to judge the quality of the science behind each of the herbal medicinals are listed and defined. The Introduction also describes how data are summarized in the tables for each herbal, as well as the statistical and epidemiological analyses included.

The herbal medicinals reviewed in the text are organized in alphabetical order according to their most common names. Each chapter begins with a list of names and alternative names for the herbals, followed by a synopsis of the

“Clinical Bottom Line”. The clinical bottom line includes a table in which the clinical uses of the herbal are ranked according to the best available evidence. What follows are sections on Dosing/Toxicology, Safety and Interactions. Each chapter concludes with an abbreviated list of references in alphabetical order, that are unfortunately, not cited within the text. The absence of citations within the text is uncharacteristic for our specialty, and creates a disconnect between the text statements and their sources. The omission of references from the text should be addressed in future editions.

Immediately following the 90 plus herbals, we find two appendices that summarize the data presented in the first part of the book under different headings. Appendix A summarizes 12 major interactions between clinical/pharmacologic conditions such as bleeding and sedation, and herbal medicinals. Appendix B contains 160 health conditions that reflect the therapeutic effects of herb medicinals. Each condition begins with the strength of the evidence for which the herb medicinals is indicated, followed by the herbal medicinals and their individual clinical effects.

Not only are these two monographs extremely well-written and clearly organized, but they establish a new standard for an evidence-based approach to clinical medicine. The Natural standard research collaboration, which is responsible for both of these monographs, should be proud of this first effort in summarizing the most common herbal medicinals using a scientific perspective. By providing an

evidence-based scientific approach, the collaboration has empowered the readers with valuable information regarding the roles of herbs to treat specific conditions but more importantly for anesthesiologists, have detailed evidence of herbal-drug and herbal-condition interactions. This monograph is strongly recommended for every anesthetic department and for every clinician involved in the clinical anesthetic care of children and adults.

Jerrold Lerman MD, FRCPC, FANZCA

Clinical Professor of Anesthesia, Women and Children's Hospital of Buffalo, SUNY, Buffalo; Strong Memorial Hospital, University of Rochester, Rochester NY; and Interim-Chief, Department of Anesthesia, St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, Philadelphia, PA