



BOOK REVIEW

Ethan Basch, Catherine Ulbricht (Eds.), *Natural Standard Herb & Supplement Handbook: The Clinical Bottom Line*, Elsevier Mosby, St. Louis, Missouri, 963pp., Price \$38.95 (US), ISBN: 0323029930

Ethan Basch, Catherine Ulbricht (Eds.), *Natural Standard Herb & Supplement Reference: Evidence-Based Clinical Reviews*, Elsevier Mosby, St. Louis, Missouri, 1012pp., Price \$129 (US), ISBN: 0323029949.

The amount of time, effort and diligent gathering, sifting and sorting of available information that has gone into production of these two books is apparent from the moment they are opened.

Quite simply everything that has ever been meaningfully researched regarding the 90 or so substances (herbs and nutrients) under systematic review, from Acidophilus to Yohimbe bark extract, is described and evaluated.

The information used in the analysis has been derived from 10 major databases, as well as individual searches of 20 additional journals that are not indexed, plus 50 selected secondary references.

This huge international collaborative effort was undertaken by some 300 contributors, from many disciplines, led by Catherine Ulbricht PharmD and Ethan Basch MD—both of the Natural Standard Research Collaboration in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The smaller handbook contains the distilled information contained in all its complexity and depth, in the larger comprehensive ‘reference’ text.

What emerges from them both is an extremely useful, clinically definitive, picture of the therapeutic potential of the substances under review.

These have been graded using a scale that covers all ranges of evidence, with A equalling *strong scientific evidence*, B = *good scientific evidence*, C = *unclear or conflicting scientific evidence*, D = *fair negative scientific evidence*, and F = *strong negative scientific evidence*.

In the larger reference text the following sections are included—for each substance:

- Synonyms/common names/related substances.

- Clinical bottom-line—that includes a brief summary of the substance and the findings of the systematic review of evidence, as well as the grading chart that lists the evidence and a grade (A, B, C, etc.) alongside particular conditions treated.
- An example of this is a ‘B’ grade for bacterial vaginosis treated using Acidophilus. This section—for this example—also summarizes evidence for use of suppositories and yogurt enriched with acidophilus. A comprehensive list of other conditions treated with acidophilus all attract grades of ‘C’.
- A box of information lists the use of the substance under review, based on tradition and theory, where limited or no evidence exists.

Further information for each substance includes sections on:

- Dosage and toxicology.
- Standardization (for adults and children).
- Safety.
- Allergic possibilities.
- Use during pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- An important section (for each substance) looks at interactions with drugs and with other herbs and dietary supplements. For example, did you know that if aloe vera is used in combination with insulin it can produce increased potassium depletion and may increase hypoglycaemic effects?
- Finally, for each substance, a lengthy selected list of references is provided (with further information available on the www.naturalstandards.com website).

Many of the herb or nutrient sections contain detailed discussion of research studies relating to the use of that substance in treating particular conditions.

Additional tables and columns of information are provided evaluating the quality of research studies. These have been graded from 0 to 5 (5 is strongest)

based on the Jadad scale (Was the study randomized? Was it double-blind? etc.).

Other refinements in the information provided allows the text to describe 'magnitude of benefit' (small, medium, large or none), expressed in terms of standard deviation (SD) of the outcome measure. For example a 'large' benefit is expressed as $> 1SD$. And then there are the appendices.

- Appendix A looks at interactions. It offers lists of herbs and supplements that produce, for example, hypo and hyperglycemic effects, or hepatotoxic, or hypotensive, or progestational or estrogenic effects....and so on.
- Appendix B is extremely useful, covering as it does a wide range of conditions (Acne to Wound healing), with lists of nutrients and herbs where there is evidence of positive or negative results (using A–F grades as described above), as well as lists of substances, based on their traditional or theoretical use in treating the named condition, where supporting evidence is absent.

So, what emerges from this mammoth, heroic endeavour?

Well, to be sure, many commonly used nutrients and herbs are graded as 'C'—where evidence is unclear or conflicting.

A 'C' grade should however not be seen as an indication to stop prescribing the nutrient or herb, *since lack of proof of efficacy is certainly not proof of lack of efficacy*.

And of course there are many D and F grades—that do indeed suggest that such products should not be prescribed for the conditions studied—or sometimes, at all.

For example, Boron gets a D rating for use as a bodybuilding aid (where it is employed for its theoretical ability to increase testosterone levels). A detailed evaluation of the Boron section suggests that it may be helpful in osteoporosis and osteoarthritis (both get C grades), but that it is unsafe during pregnancy and breast feeding, and should be avoided for infants and children (where there have been fatalities). It is particularly contraindicated in individuals with oestrogen-sensitive cancers, or where there are kidney problems—unless the individual is on dialysis since boron is lost from the bloodstream during this process. In each of the substances under review, such information (and there is much much more than can be listed here) is invaluable for safe prescribing or self-use.

Borderline findings are numerous, for example Devils Claw for backache gets a C rating, as does Co-EnzymeQ10 for angina pain (it gets a B for hypertension though).

Some of the many A and B grades include (selected in this review for their possible usefulness in manual medicine settings):

- Glucosamine for osteoarthritis (particularly of the knee) and related conditions, receives an A grade—however, there are numerous cautions and precautions, particularly relating to pregnancy, diabetes, renal impairment and people with peptic ulcers.
- Melatonin for jet lag (A) and for insomnia (B)—where Valerian also gets a B.
- Horse chestnut (*Aesculus*) for Chronic venous insufficiency (e.g. varicosities), and also for lower extremity edema—A.
- Ginkgo biloba for Intermittent claudication (A)—also gets a 'B' for dementia and for memory enhancement.
- St. John's Wort for mild to moderate depression—A.
- Saw palmetto for benign prostatic hypertrophy receives an A grade.
- Aloe vera for psoriasis and seborrheic dermatitis—B (Evening primrose gets a 'D').
- Evening primrose oil for eczema and atopic dermatitis—B.
- Pineapple Bromelain for painful inflammation—B.
- Omega 3 (fish oil) for rheumatoid arthritis, and for SLE—B.
- Boswellia for chronic asthma—B.
- Bitter melon and/or Ginseng and/or Gymnema for Diabetes—B.
- Black cohosh and/or Soy for PMS, dysmenorrhea, and for menopausal symptoms—all B, where Evening Primrose and Yam both receive D.
- Kava for anxiety (A)—with Lavender receiving B.
- Feverfew for migraine headache prevention—B.

If you use nutrients and/or herbs in treatment of your patients, one or both of these books are highly recommended.

If you seek the deeper background to the findings you need the Reference text, and if you require a compact desktop text, you need the 'Clinical Bottom Line' handbook.

I shall treasure both—if my acquisitive and inquisitive daughter allows me to.

The editors and publishers deserve praise for this ongoing task—as future editions will update and expand on these gems.

Leon Chaitow
School of Integrated Health,
University of Westminster, 115 Cavendish Street,
London W1M 8JS, UK
E-mail address: leon@bodymovedemon.co.uk