

Book Review: A guide to evidence-based Integrative and Complementary Medicine.

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This book is a standard 18cm x 24½cm x 3½cm sized soft-cover book that comprises 970 pages, if one includes the list of content, foreword, preface, acknowledgements, authors, contributors, reviewers and abbreviations pages, together with the index; it weighs in at just over 1¼kg. It is printed on good quality matt paper and the immediate impression is that of a quality product.

The first impression when one browses through the book is that it contains a great deal of information. The many diagrams, tables and text boxes provide added structure to the chapters and bring welcome support to the wealth of information contained in each chapter, while the blue/grey colour scheme used in the chapter titles, text boxes and tables is easy on the eyes.

On closer scrutiny, it becomes obvious that the book is composed of texts from a number of contributors, as there can be quite a difference between the layout and the style of the chapters. The positive of this is that it makes each chapter appear fresh, but the negative is that the book is somewhat more difficult to use as a quick reference guide.

Nevertheless, this book covers an enormous amount of ground; it provides up-to-date information on research related to alternative medicine approaches and clearly shows how these may be integrated into a medical practice; while the extensive references list at the end of each chapter gives a sense of confidence in the material presented and also provides a resource for further study.

Firstly, this is not a book for the lay person, as the medical terminology and the constant use of abbreviations would make it very heavy going for someone without a health science background. Its whole slant is clearly towards medical practitioners, medical students and nurse practitioners who are interested in integrative medicine, or utilise this in their practice; although the larger proportion of the information contained in this volume would also be relevant to health professionals who work in non-medical fields, such as dieticians, chiropractors and naturopaths.

The book is composed of three distinct parts: Part 1 consists of the introduction and provides a brief set of instructions on nutritional assessment and therapies, this section spans 44 pages; Part 2 takes up 785 pages, that is the bulk of the book, this describes 36 common clinical conditions and their integrative treatment approaches; and Part 3 is composed of a total of 81 pages that provide precautions as regards the use of complementary medicine, this consist of tables that list herb/nutrient/drug interactions, information on potential adverse reactions, and a chapter on food sources of nutrients, phytonutrients and other chemicals.

It is of course not possible to do justice to the wealth of information contained in this volume in this short book review, and the authors have clearly expended a great deal of effort in providing a comprehensive and authoritative text.

This volume is exciting in many ways, and not just because it provides a concise guide to the application of integrative medicine, but particularly because it brings together so much evidence-based information. No doubt integrative medicine is the medicine of the future and as medical research into natural and traditional medicines continues apace, the usefulness and practicality of an integrative medical approach can only be expected to expand.

There is only one thing in the book that bothers me a little. Herbal medicine is included as an integrative medicine and is treated in much the same way as nutritional supplements, which are prepared in laboratories under strict quality control. Unfortunately, herbal medicine is directly derived from wild and cultivated plants. In either case the presence and level of constituents can vary widely depending on the soil, climatic conditions at the time of growth, and the genetic strain of the plant. This is the major reason why most herbal traditions use formulas containing a number of different plants, rather than "simples" (one single herb).

Let me give an example. Digoxin is a drug commonly used for certain heart conditions. This drug was first extracted in 1930 from the common Foxglove (*Digitalis lanata*). But this was not the first time digoxin was used for these conditions; its potentially life-saving properties had been known in Europe for centuries and before its extraction and standardisation by the pharmaceutical industry, Foxglove had been a common ingredient in herbal draughts for heart failure. The problem is that digoxin is toxic, and that its dose must be strictly controlled to provide a safe and effective medicine. But because Foxglove is a living plant, the amount of digoxin present in a given dose could vary widely depending on source and season. As a result fatal outcomes of this herbal medicine were common, either because the medicine contained too little or too much digoxin. Of course these days no sane person would seriously consider using Foxglove for therapeutic purposes, and the plant is certainly not mentioned in this book. But as stated above, this is only intended as an example; this variability of constituents due to environmental factors and genetic diversity applies to all plants.

In addition, one cannot just use whatever herb one wishes together with any other herb, as some herbs potentise each other's therapeutic effect, others nullify it, and still others modify each other's therapeutic properties completely. Thus the efficacious and safe use of medicinal plants requires some specialist knowledge and skill, and bringing herbs into a medical practice adds a complex and relatively unpredictable ingredient into the mix; one that may take the medical practitioner who is used to dealing with single compound pharmaceutical drugs by some surprise.

I am not trying to say that the use of herbal medicine in an integrative practice should be avoided, quite to the contrary. But I am saying that there should be an awareness of the complexity of herbal medicine and of the potential pitfalls when herbal medicine is combined with medical treatment.

Therefore I recommend that those who intend to use herbal medicine in their practice set out to first learn the essentials of traditional herbal medicine. Of course this book is not designed to provide such training, and certainly does not claim to do so. This is therefore not intended as a criticism on the scope and content of this volume which is impressive in its own right.

All-in-all this book represents a milestone. It marks a turning point in medicine and facilitates the exploration and application of integrative medicine. It is concise, comprehensive and well researched and provides a wealth of information that is, despite a tendency in some places to go overboard with medical jargon and abbreviations, still accessible and readable.

To my mind it represents a great resource for those who are interested in using integrative medicine in their practice, as well as for those who have been involved in this for some time.

This surely has to be a book that anyone with an interest in integrative medicine would want to own.