

BOOK REVIEWS

It was estimated that approximately 30% of American adults were using herbal products in 1996. Family physicians are frequently faced with patients who are using herbal preparations in combination with prescription drug therapy. Reliable information about the safety and efficacy of herbal products, however, can be difficult to find and apply to patient situations. Consequently, there is a critical need for family physicians to have access to complete information about the herbal therapies their patients are using.

Currently, herbal products may be sold over the counter in the United States without Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval, as long as the manufacturers refrain from making specific health claims. To gain FDA approval, companies must provide extensive research supporting efficacy and safety. Most companies have resisted doing this research, in part because there are no patent rights available for these herbal products.

In the United States information on drugs is standardized, because the FDA controls the process. There is no comparable process for herbal products. Therefore, each reference source that covers these products may contain slightly or significantly different information for a given herb. Furthermore, users of these references should understand that the descriptions rarely contain the amount of detailed information provided for an FDA-approved drug.

Family physicians are faced with the dilemma of how to determine what herbal therapies are safe, effective, and compatible with their patients' prescribed regimens. In the following book reviews, we evaluate 3 reference texts.

Each text consists of a series of individual herbal monographs that provide common and scientific names, description of the active compound of the plant, clinical effects and uses, adverse effects, dosage, and drug interactions.

The Complete German Commission E Monographs: Therapeutic Guide to Herbal Medicines. Mark Blumenthal, ed. American Botanical Council in cooperation with Integrative Medicine Communications, Austin, Tex, 1998. 685 pp, ISBN 0-96555-550-X. \$189.00.

The Complete German Commission E Monographs is a translation of guidelines developed by an expert committee for the use of herbal medicines that was appointed by the German government. The text contains reviews that were published between 1983 and 1995 covering 254 approved and 126 unapproved herbal products. Information from 81 more recently revised monographs has been included in the US publication.

The Commission's members include physicians, pharmacists, pharmacologists, toxicologists, and representatives of the pharmaceutical industry. Data reviewed by the Commission include reports of clinical trials, field studies, case studies, animal and in vitro data, and expert opinions from medical associations and individuals. This process differs markedly from the review process used by the FDA. Commission E works to establish a "reasonable certainty" of the safety and efficacy of herbal products. The results of that work are used to determine whether the product is approved.

The monographs list approved modes of administration of dosages and preparations, as well as contraindications. The original publication or revision date of the review is included. Unique to the text is an index for approved herbals showing the duration of use determined safe by Commission E. References reviewed by Commission E are not included with the monographs.

The information in the book is comprehensive but somewhat difficult to use. The authors have tried to simplify the process of locating information by employing bold-faced page numbers for monographs in the general index and page headers to orient the reader to the sections of the text. Cross-reference tables allow users to find products by common, scientific, or chemical name. Information is indexed by indications and contraindications of the herbal products approved by Commission E, as well as side effects, pharmacologic actions, and interactions with conventional drugs for approved and unapproved herbs. Despite these efforts, the text can be confusing and laborious to use.

PDR for Herbal Medicines. Medical Economics Company, Montvale, NJ. 1998, 1244 pp, ISBN 1-56363-292-6. \$60.00

The *PDR for Herbal Medicines* provides approximately 600 monographs of specific herbal products, as well as a user-friendly indexing strategy. Of the 600 monographs, 300 are adapted from the German Commission E. An additional 300 were added on the basis of an "exhaustive literature review" conducted by the US Institute of Phytopharmaceuticals. Although there are a number of references listed in the monographs, many of them were published in German, and there is no pretense that this is an evidence-based review.

The book provides a guide of interactions between

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drugs and herbal products organized by both the generic drug name and the scientific herb name, as well as a color pictorial of all the herbs reviewed. The monographs often make a distinction between so-called proven herbal indications and unsubstantiated uses found in folk medicine. The dosage sections describe modes of administration and sometimes provide useful dosage recommendations.

The *PDR for Herbal Medicines* includes particularly good indexes, including alphabetical lists of herbs by scientific and common names, indications, therapeutic category, and side effects. Although this makes the book easier to use, it does not guarantee accurate information.

The Review of Natural Products 1996. Facts and Comparisons, St. Louis, Mo. 1996, ISSN 1089-5302. \$185; \$100 for annual updates.

Known as *The Lawrence Review of Natural Products* before 1996, this publication provides 287 herbal monographs that can be stored in a 3-ring binder. Each monograph is primarily written by the editor and then peer reviewed by an interdisciplinary field of medical professionals. The information in the monographs is based on research journal papers, published articles, and textbooks.

Each monograph has a section on the herb's history and chemistry, as well as a summary of available clinical data and a review of dosages used in studies. Recently, a section called Product Listings was added that lists some of the commercial products available, with the manufacturer's or distributor's name. This is not meant as an endorsement or recommendation of a particular product or herb. A unique feature of *The Review of Natural Products* is the provision of monthly updates with 4 to 6 new or revised monographs, and a quarterly newsletter for late-breaking information. This can be an advantage, but one that requires regular filing. The large 3-ring binder can sometimes present problems: If not handled properly, the paper monographs can inadvertently be torn partially out of the binder.

The herbal monographs are filed in alphabetical order and are indexed by name and therapeutic use. There is also an appendix that contains 2 referenced drug interaction tables, an herbal diuretic table, a mushroom poisoning decision chart, a listing of US poison control centers, and addresses, Web sites, and phone numbers of scientific and trade organizations from which to obtain further information.

REFERENCE COMPARISONS

When comparing the 3 references for information on St. John's wort and Asian ginseng, we found that all of them had information on the pharmacology and indications of the herbs. Each had information on dosing, but that information was extremely variable among the references and sometimes difficult to interpret. *The Review of Natural*

Products provided the most complete information about adverse reactions and toxicology, and more information about possible drug interactions; it did not, however, give any specific information regarding treatment duration. The *PDR for Herbal Medicines* provided less information on safety, saying there were "no known drug interactions" for both types of herbal products we investigated. It also did not include recommended treatment duration. *The Complete German Commission E Monographs* did not state any safety or drug interaction concerns for either type of herbal product, but it did provide the most information on duration of treatment. When comparing these texts for interactions between warfarin and herbal products, all 3 texts listed different herbs for possible interactions, thereby revealing how much is not known.

CONCLUSIONS

These 3 references mark a beginning in the efforts to organize information on herbal products for US health care providers. Overall, we found *The Complete German Commission E Monographs* to be difficult to use and unlikely to be helpful to providers. *The PDR for Herbal Medicines* has the advantages of presenting a large number of monographs in a manageable size and of being easy to use. *The Review of Natural Products* provides the benefit of monthly updates and has more information on potential interactions between drugs and herbal products, as well as therapeutic and safety data, than the other 2 books.

These reference texts illustrate the present limitations in accessing clinically useful, reliable, and standardized information on herbal products. They make you appreciate how the FDA has brought some coherence to the vast amount of published information on prescription drugs in this country.

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SOFTWARE REVIEW

Interactive Electrocardiography. Novartis Medical Education, 556 Morris Ave, Summit, NJ 07901. (800) 631-1181. Web site: <http://www.meded.pharma.us.novartis.com/diagnos/inter.htm>.

PRICE: CD-ROM: \$59.95; CD-ROM and *Basic Electrocardiography* book: \$75.00

DOCUMENTATION: 17-page hard copy plus on-line help

HOW SUPPLIED: CD-ROM (floppy disk version available)

HARDWARE & SOFTWARE REQUIREMENTS: IBM-compatible 486, Windows 3.1 or 95, 4 MB RAM, 4 MB hard disk space,

FIGURE 1

An example of an illustration and accompanying electrocardiogram tracing.

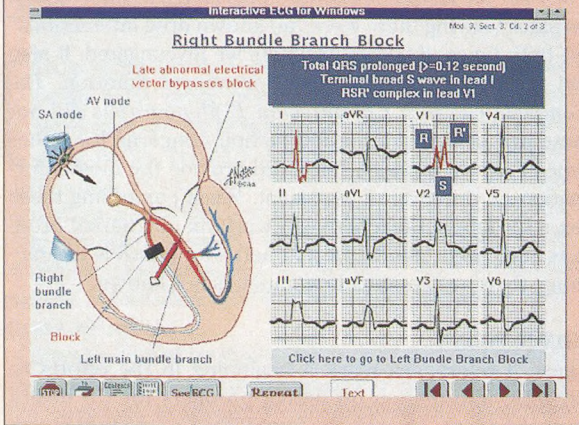
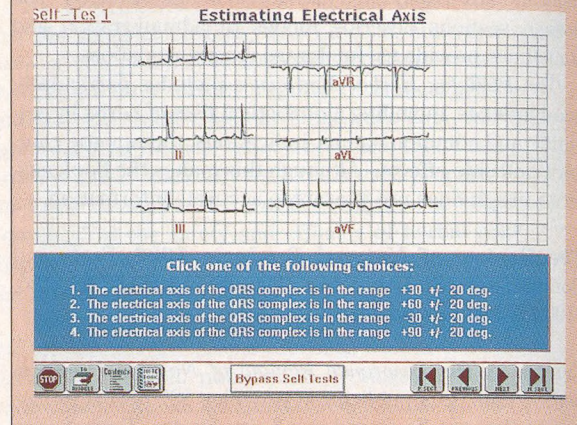


FIGURE 2

One of the self-test questions that follow every section.



13" VGA monitor, and 2X CD-ROM drive; or Macintosh 68020 processor, System 6.0.8, 4 MB RAM, 13" color monitor, and 2X CD-ROM drive
 CUSTOMER SUPPORT: (800) 453-8040
 DEMONSTRATION DISK: Demonstration CD-ROM available
 GUARANTEE: None specified
 RATING: Excellent

Interactive Electrocardiography is a tutorial and reference aimed at all physicians who read electrocardiograms (ECGs). It is based on the book *Basic Electrocardiography* written by Stephen Scheidt and illustrated by Frank Netter. Its stated purpose is to offer a concise and practical overview of basic electrocardiography.

The software was easily installed and ran swiftly and smoothly. There are several instruction screens that demonstrate the CD-ROM's various features and how to navigate through the instructional material. Most of the icons are self-explanatory, however, and the package is fairly intuitive.

Interactive Electrocardiography is divided into 4 modules covering basic theory and analysis, diagnosis of cardiac rhythms, chamber enlargement and intraventricular conduction defects, and myocardial infarction and ischemia. Those modules are followed by a self-test section and an atlas of ECG tracings. The self-test questions may be completed at the end of each section or after completion of the entire package. These questions gener-

ally require interpretation of an ECG or a rhythm strip. There is even a set of virtual calipers to assist in measuring intervals. All questions are multiple choice. Immediately after completion of each question, users are given the correct answer and an explanation. The package allows users to search for topics, and it also has a notebook feature for taking notes.

Each of the 4 modules is divided into sections. For example, the basic theory module is divided into sections on theoretical basis, lead placement, interval placement, heart rates, and electrical axis. Each section consists of a series of cards, or screens, that contain text accompanied by illustrations. Many of the illustrations include simple animation that enhances the educational value without being distracting. The ECG tracings are clear and easy to see.

The atlas section includes approximately 100 ECG tracings with a brief caption describing what each tracing demonstrates. The virtual calipers are available, along with a normal ECG tracing for comparison, in a pop-up window. The package I reviewed did not indicate that continuing medical education credit was available.

The information presented was clear and accurate, the illustrations were helpful, and the animation complemented the text without being distracting. Together they made this a valuable learning tool and reference.

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