

## Tyler's Honest Herbal: A Sensible Guide to the Use of Herbs and Related Remedies, fourth edition.

Foster S, Tyler VE. Haworth Press Inc, Binghamton, New York, 1999. Hardcover, 442 pages. US\$59.95 (softcover US\$24.95).

One year ago, Health Canada announced the creation of the Office of Natural Health Products, giving it the mandate "to regulate natural health products to ensure that Canadians will have access to safe, high quality, properly labeled products". Natural health products have existed in regulatory limbo, regulated by the *Food and Drug Act* even though they are neither food nor drugs. Although the impact of the Health Canada initiative on pharmacy is speculative, pharmacists need to know more about these products. The authors of the fourth edition of *Tyler's Honest Herbal* recognize this need when they state that "the entry of herbs into the mass market has created a 'cart before the horse' situation for education of health care professionals in the retail environment, particularly for pharmacists. Buyers for chain drugstores or discount department store pharmacies have filled shelf space with herb products before a new generation of pharmacists has had an opportunity to learn of the risks, benefits, proper dosage forms, contraindications, and side effects of the thousands of herb products that have flooded the market."

The perspective of the authors, in distinct contrast to that of herbalists, is that these products are drugs. For example, the authors state that "regardless of the regulatory or legal advantages that may be gained by calling them something else, whenever herbs are used to diagnose, cure, mitigate, treat or prevent disease, they are, by definition, drugs." And again, "call them dietary supplements, call them fairy dust, herbs are still — by any reasonable definition — drugs."

The authors set the scientific grounding for the book in the preface and introduction, stating that "for herbs to reach their rightful role in making a significant contribution to affordable health care in the United States, they must be assessed from a scientific viewpoint that ensures: (1) proper botanical identity of plant material; (2) predictable chemical consistency from batch to batch; (3) predictable therapeutic benefits, based not only on traditional knowledge but also on well-designed, controlled clinical studies; and (4) proof of safety."

By the authors' own admission, *Tyler's Honest Herbal* is a conservative compilation of "write-ups" on herbal remedies. Each herb monograph provides a definite recommendation as to the safety and efficacy of the product. In addition, summary charts outline the principle use or uses and rate the "apparent efficacy" and "probable safety" of each herb as "effective, safe in normal individuals", "efficacy or safety inconclusive", or "ineffective, not safe". The strength of the text lies in the applicability of the information to a wide audience (which likely explains why the first and second editions sold out). Laypersons and health-care professionals alike will gain insight into the complexity of the topic, as well as the caveats and alleged

uses for these products. Attempts have been made to update the recent edition with landmark trials published since the last edition (for example, trials of *Ginkgo biloba* for Alzheimer-type dementia and of palmetto extract for benign prostatic hyperplasia). As with any text, however, the most recent publications relevant to the topic are not cited.

The question of whether or not this book meets the needs of hospital pharmacists depends on what your needs are. If you are looking for a conservative reference that is in tune with your prior beliefs about herbal products, this text may be comforting (the authors discourage the use of specific herbs more often than they promote them). The text is a light read (the write-up for each herb is 2 to 4 pages long), offering historical perspectives and some safety data. The authors indirectly provide a "thumbs-up" or "thumbs-down" approach to a topic that is often not categorical.

Personally, I was disappointed by the combination of the prologue, which argued for objective scientific validation, and the text, which delivered, for the most part, subjective opinions. The few primary references mentioned were not critically assessed, and no attempt was made to grade recommendations according to the level of available evidence. For those looking for assistance in their pharmaceutical care practice, essentially no information is provided on dosages, duration of use, usage in special populations (such as elderly patients, children, and patients with liver or renal disease), or drug-herb interactions (a number of which have recently been reported).

Having reviewed other herbal references, including the German Commission E monographs, I am aware that many of the deficiencies cited above are universal. Although I'm not "high" on *Tyler's Honest Herbal*, I "honestly" am unable to offer many alternatives. For those interested, the drug information centre at our institution has found The Natural Pharmacy online database<sup>1</sup> a good source for drug interactions. The alternative therapy reviews published by the *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy* and the book *Herbal Medicines*<sup>2</sup> are also good general sources.

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### References

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