Reviewer’s report

Title: A Comparison of Complementary and Alternative Medicine Users and Use across Geographical Areas: A National Survey of 1,427 Women

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Reviewer: Fuschia M. Sirois

Reviewer’s report:

The issue addressed by this paper is an important and often overlooked one, namely the potential reasons for differences in CAM consumption in rural versus urban settings. Examining the links of CAM use with a sense of community and conventional medicine accessibility also increases the value of this work. The sample size although large, focuses mainly on female CAM consumers. Given that more women than men use CAM this is a negligible limitation. The introduction is concise but thorough and the need for the current study is cogently argued. The analyses are well linked to the main research questions regarding the differential factors associated with urban versus rural CAM use, and the Tables clearly present the main results. The interpretation of the findings is for the most part not overstated.

I have only a couple of suggestions/questions for the authors that when addressed will further strengthen an already excellent manuscript.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1) Page 1: The authors mention previous work that proposes that accessibility issues may account for the differences in CAM use across the urban/rural divide. Unless I am mistaken, none of the studies cited actually tested whether accessibility was a reason for higher CAM use in rural areas. In this respect then the current study is unique and perhaps this point should be more explicitly stated in the discussion. There has also been at least one other study though that directly examined the links among CAM use, geographical location, and accessibility to conventional medical care and satisfaction with that care:


Citing this other work strengthens the argument that location does matter for CAM use, at least from the perspective of accessibility to medical care.

2) It may be wise to link the current findings to the larger existing body of CAM literature on the sources of information that people use to guide their decision to use CAM (e.g., Caspi, Koithan, & Criddle, 2004; Robinson & Cooper, 2007), which echoes the themes found in this study. Applying the lens of geographical
distribution of CAM use puts this established research in a very different light and suggests the possibility that location or place may need to be considered when examining how people learn about and receive information about CAM use. Some mention of the broader importance of this paper for understanding the sources of CAM information therefore seems warranted.

3) On page 9 the authors state “In contrast to previous research findings illustrating an association between poor health and CAM use [4, 5, 14, 35], this study found no significant differences in the health status of CAM users across residence.” I think this statement needs some clarification and elaboration in regards to the studies cited, as those studies, like many others, found that CAM use increases with poor health, BUT only when you compare non-users to users, or in the case of other research (e.g., Sirois & Gick, 2002), when you compare long time CAM users to new CAM users. I think the issue of health not being associated with CAM use in the context of “place” (urban vs. rural) is an interesting but likely complex one that the authors have not fully addressed. Perhaps the authors could comment on other factors that may be obscuring possible differences, if they exist, especially since it is well known (at least in Canada) that there is a health status gradient associated the urban/rural divide. Some speculation and perhaps discussion of why health status may not play a role for explaining CAM use across this geographical divide would invite further discussion and perhaps research into this unanswered issue.

Minor Essential Revisions

1) Although the use of an all female sample is not a large limitation given the established demographic of most CAM users, some mention that of this limitation should be made in the opening paragraph of the Discussion.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests