Reviewer's report

Title: The role of natural health products (NHPs) in dietetic practice: Results from a survey of Canadian dietitians

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Reviewer: Annette Dickinson

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Dickinson review of article for BMC Complementary & Alternative Medicine, April 2013

The authors had clear questions about Canadian dietitians’ attitudes and practices about Natural Health Products and designed a survey to answer those questions. The methods appear to be appropriate and well designed, although I do have some questions about the definition of the product categories (see below under Minor Essential Revisions). The data obtained from the survey are sound and relevant. The discussion and conclusions from the survey are well balanced and supported by data, and the limitations are clearly stated. The abstract and the title convey the topic and the findings, and the article is generally well written.

Discretionary revisions:

1. The term "dietary supplements" is sometimes used in the text to refer to some of the products, and this term should probably be included among the Key Words.

2. Reference 2 is for a 1996 position paper on vitamins and minerals, which I believe has been superseded by a 2009 position paper on nutrient supplementation, JADA 2009; 109(12)2073-85. Also, note that the American Dietetic Association has recently adopted the name Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, which may not be relevant when discussing previous position statements.

3. Paragraph 6 of the Background section cites reference 7 regarding the questions received by dietitians about vitamins/minerals and herbal products "in the past five years," but the reference for this was published in 2001, so the reference is not to the most recent past five years.

4. The next paragraph starts with a reference to "one notable exception" but cites two references, not one. The intended reference appears to be 14 rather than 15, since the page citation is from reference 14.

5. The next-to-last paragraph in the Background section, and the paragraph before it, both end with "etc," which I believe is weak and would be best avoided. Also, in the next-to-last paragraph, there is a mis-spelling (neutraceuticals).

6. Paragraph 3 of the Methods section says the survey addressed perceptions with regard to "dietary supplements." Would it not be more consistent to refer to
Natural Health Products here? The paragraph ends with another mention of "dietary supplements" instead of Natural Health Products. Dietary supplements is the U.S. regulatory category that covers nutritional supplements and herbal products (but not functional foods). The term also appears a couple of other times in the manuscript and perhaps should be replaced by Natural Health Products.

7. In the Results section under Response Rate, the authors say the primary employment setting by far is hospitals. Then they refer to other primary employment settings "with larger numbers of RDs," which is confusing, since these other settings are evidently not as large as the hospital setting. Perhaps they mean to refer to other settings with "substantial" numbers of RDs.

8. In the section on Views About Inclusion of NHPs in Dietetic Scope of Practice, in the middle of the first paragraph there is a missing word ("of"). The sentence should say "specifically, 74% (381) of RDs report........" Also, the word "report" in this sentence might be replaced with "believe," even if that means using the term twice in close proximity. In the third paragraph in this section, after the subhead "personal consumption", the word "ingesting" should start with a capital I.

9. In the paragraph just before "Limitations," the authors say RDs who provide counselling "are 0.5 times less likely to believe......" Perhaps it would be more clear to say that they are "only half as likely to believe......."

10. There are a lot of figures. Are they all essential, or could some be removed or combined?

Minor essential revisions:

11. The authors are inquiring about the appropriate scope of practice for dietitians relating to Natural Health Products, which they define to include nutritional supplements, functional foods/nutraceuticals, and herbal preparations. These are logical categories for consideration by dietitians, but (as noted in the text) they are not exactly the categories defined by Health Canada as Natural Health Products. I think a little more clarity is needed on this point, as illustrated below.

In the third paragraph of the Background section, the authors say that until 2004 "only two categories of products were available for sale in Canada." This is an overstatement, since there are obviously many different categories of a wide variety of products for sale in Canada. They describe NHPs as a third category, but in fact NHPs are a subcategory of drugs. Building on their prior discussion of functional foods and nutraceuticals, it would be more accurate to say something like: "Functional foods and nutraceuticals are typically regulated as foods under Canada's Food and Drugs Act, while some related products including nutritional supplements and herbal products have traditionally been regulated as drugs in Canada under the same Act. Within the drug category, a special subset called Natural Health Products has been recognized in Canadian legislation since January 1, 2004."

Major compulsory revisions: none
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:

I was a longtime employee of the Council for Responsible Nutrition, a U.S. trade association representing the dietary supplement industry, and in my semi-retirement I continue to consult for this association. However, I perceive no conflict that would be affected in any way by publication of this paper. My experience did give me a useful understanding of Natural Health Products in Canada as well as dietary supplements in the U.S., which I believe allowed me to make useful comments on this manuscript.