Reviewer's report

Title: Acute adverse events from over-the-counter Chinese Herbal Medicines: A population-based survey of Hong Kong Chinese.

Version: 1 Date: 24 April 2013

Reviewer: annabella vitalone

Reviewer's report:

This study analyzed the acute adverse events from over-the-counter Chinese Herbal Medicines, by a population-based survey. This topic is of interest and it is relevant in field of the safety of over-the-counter Chinese medicines. However, beyond the concrete clarifications and the improvements of the English language, the present manuscript deals only “the surface” of the severity of adverse reactions, does not mention any kind of specific product and does not propose any new solutions to improve the knowledge on over-the-counter Chinese medicines. Therefore, the manuscript cannot be accepted as it is, but need various essential revisions.

Major compulsory revisions

Abstract section
Method subsection: Please specify if all study participants have provided the informed consent. Otherwise, the same phrase reported in the Method – Study population (“Research ethics approval was obtained from the ethics board of the sponsoring university.”) should be added.

Introduction section
Second paragraph: authors should clarify the meaning and the differences between “transitional licensure scheme” and “formal registration”.
Third paragraph, lines 11-13: Authors should explain why they considered that study carried out “from emergency room admissions” “may present a highly biased picture of the COTC-related harms in the general population.” Data coming from the emergency department are often useful in the evaluation (and indicative) of the severity and seriousness of adverse reactions.

Method section
Measurements - Socio-demographic and background information, lines 4-7: authors should better elucidate the meaning of “decoction from TCM shops” and of “COTC is sold as mass-manufactured, pre-dosed forms”.

Result section
The results should be considered as Results, without the addition of any comments (i.e., “incorrectly”, fourth line of the second paragraph) and avoiding
the repetition of numbers and data in the text, as well as in the Tables (see lines 3-16, etc.).

Since various pharmaceutical forms (e.g. pills/capsules, plasters, ointments/creams) are only listed, without any relation with the type of the adverse reactions (ARs), authors should better clarify why was so important to emphasized the pharmaceutical form that has been involved in the adverse reactions (ARs).

Table 1: please check the queuing of the table, because appears totally incorrect; specify the superscript “a” and “b” meaning and their relation with “2011 Hong Kong Census provisional figures” and “2006 Hong Kong Population By-Census”.

Tables are too many and too long, please try to synthesized and to discuss more data (without repetition) in the text.

Minor (but important) issues not for publication

The language, grammar and punctuation need a thorough revision, all over the paper. Some phrases should be restructured. For examples, in the Abstract section – Conclusion subsection: “… the inaccessibility of reliable information and widespread misperceptions among consumers present major challenges for safe complementary medicine use” should be rewrite in “… the inaccessibility of reliable information and widespread misperceptions among consumers present the major challenges for the safe use of complementary medicine”. Moreover, Introduction section (third line): “There has, however, in recent years been greater availability of the TCM products in non-Asian countries” should be rewrite as “In recent years, there has been a greater availability of the TCM products in non-Asian countries”.

Other sentences should be also revised, including:

Introduction section, first paragraph, line 6-8;

second paragraph, line 1-3 (please, check also the punctuation);

Method section, fourth line of the Study population subsection;

Method section, first line of “Socio-demographic and background information” (“information of respondents were asked of respondents…” could be changed in “information of respondents were recorded…”

Results section, first line of the fourth paragraph, etc., etc.

Results section: What authors mean for “Qi imbalances” (lines 4-5)? Please, specify.

Table 2: How can be considered as “inconvenient” (or as a barrier) to get information from TCM doctors? Please, answer to this question..

Minor points/Discretionary revisions:

Abstract section

Second line of the Results subsection the phrase in parenthesis “(3.2% of COTC users)”, in my opinion, it is not clear and can be omitted.
Line 6 of the Results subsection the word “plasters” is already exhaustive of the pharmaceutical form, so that “dressings” can be deleted.

Keywords: “Drug Policy” should be deleted, as it is not relevant.

Method section:
- third line of “Socio-demographic and background information”: “(Yes, No)” can be omitted, fourth line “,(See Table 1 for response categories),” punctuation must be revised and the sentence should be changed in “… (Table 1).”
- third line of “Knowledge and perceptions of TCM and proprietary Chinese medicine”: “(Yes/Agree, Not Sure, No/Disagree)” can be omitted; and in the lines 5-6 of the same paragraph “of” should be added between “and the perceived severity” and “these effects.”

Results section: “Of the study sample 2.3% (3.2% of COTC users)” do not add any significant information and it is not so clear, therefore can be deleted.

Table 1: specify “PT” and “NA” in the footnotes; “c” superscript is in red colour, instead of black.
Table 2: specify “N” and “Y” in the footnotes

Figure 1 is of poor quality, please improve its format/pixel number.

References: Insert a “new line” between “Scheid” and the other reference “Sin”.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.