Reviewer's report

Title: The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) by African American (AA) and Caucasian American (CA) Elders in a Rural Setting: a Descriptive, Comparative Study

Version: 1 Date: 23 September 2003

Reviewer: rebecca rees

Reviewer's report:

General

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
1) authors might check whether reference 4, used to support claims for motivations for CAM use, actually is an empirical study of such motivations - I don't know the study but it looks more like a commentary. Alternatively, Ref no 13 (Astin) is a study focused on motivation for CAM use.

2) Claim in second para of background, starting "The older population is a group that .." needs supporting by reference to empirical research.
3) Authors may want to refer to a recently published national probability survey of CAM use in different ethnic populations (Mackenzie et al, 2003)

4) "in our country" (first sentence of background) needs unpacking for an audience likely to included residents outside the US.

References:

Minor Compulsory Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1) Since there are many possible definitions of "older population", that used by the authors for the purposes of this study needs to be presented earlier - I think within the first few sentences of background.

2) asterisk in table 2 needs explaining

3) full reference, including journal edition and page nos, needed for reference 3

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1) the argument for the need to research the use of CAM by older populations is generally well made but claims for the effectiveness or otherwise of CAM need to be supported by reference to sound
clinical research. Several relevant systematic reviews have been published that review the evidence for effectiveness claims of relevance to aging populations (likely to be more than those referenced below). Authors need to make critical use of such reviews if referring to CAM effects.

2) While the authors did use categories of CAM that are Nationally recognised and describe their CAM use questionnaire well in their methods section, they appear to have developed this questionnaire for the purposes of the study and to have used it without pre-testing it. Such questionnaires are notoriously unreliable and can lead to poor quality data. Readers would benefit from mention of these potential problems in the report's discussion section

3) The study is a survey and so data are necessarily uncontrolled to some extent, making it relevant to reflect, instead, on the generalizability of the findings from the sample accessed by this study. There are two big issues for me here, the ways in which those who choose to attend workshops about CAM represent older rural people and the extent to which those at the workshops who returned a completed questionnaire represented those who were at the workshops. With respect to the first of these the authors make passing reference to the unbiased nature of the workshops, however I think it is essential to acknowledge, at least, that a workshop entitled "What everyone should know about CAM" might attract some older people more than others (aside from those with no interest in CAM, what about older people who for various reasons - bed-bound, hospitalised, caring for others - can't attend workshops?). With regard to the second issue about representativeness, the authors present the rate of return of completed questionnaires from those attending the workshops as 49%. They need to note that this response rate is relatively low. It is known from survey research that questionnaire respondents tend to differ from those who do not respond. To add a needed cautionary tone, the authors in their discussion section could note that the actual CAM use of those who did not respond could modify an estimate for CAM use among the sample attending the workshops. The authors' current reference to methodological limitations (sentence in the methods section starting "The availability of older adults") is currently too superficial and needs unpacking in the study's discussion section to be useful to the reader. Whatever cautionary notes are added, it is essential to avoid extending generalisations of the findings from the study sample to older rural people in general.

4) Second and third sentences in Results section of Abstract need to be reconsidered for their relevance to abstract. Main question of study appears to be, do older adults in rural settings differ in their use of CAM in ways related to their ethnicity? The following reported finding seems more relevant: "Overall, CA [I'd add "the CA in our sample"] used more CAM products than...".

5) conclusion that older adults are satisfied with their use [of CAM] is not supported by the study because it overgeneralises given the study's convenience sample

6) The conclusion related to satisfaction needs to be removed from the abstract as argued above for the conclusion section.

References:


Evans JR. Ginkgo biloba extract for age-related macular degeneration (Cochrane Review). In: The
Advice on publication: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: A paper of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Declaration of competing interests: None