Reviewer's report

Title: Herbal Use Among Urban Multiethnic Primary Care Patients: A Cross-Sectional Survey

Version: 1 Date: 10 June 2004

Reviewer: Ernesto Kahan

Reviewer's report:

General

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

The paper deals with a timely issue that is relevant to BMC medicine, and provides a wealth of information. However, much of it goes unanalyzed, so that the overall contribution to practitioners is low. The authors may have perceived this problem themselves, considering their 4-word answer in the conclusion to the questions formulated in the objectives ("describe the use, examine factors associated with and investigate patterns of herbal drugs..."), namely, "Herbal use is common". They then discuss issues related to the disclosure of herbal use to health care providers.

The methodology used is good and the paper is well organized, but should cover more of the available data. This is true for the discussion as well.

Additional changes:

Title: I suggest to change the second part of the title, "A Cross-Sectional Survey", to "Associated Factors" or to "Report to Health Care Providers", which would be more in line with the contents of the paper.

Abstract:

Should be rewritten with consideration of the changes proposed for the other sections.

Background:

Page 4 Para 1. – Add new references on the subject:

Page 4 Para 2. - The sentence "The prevalence of herbal use among racially...is not known..." should be modified. See reference 4 (Eisenberg DM et al. Unconventional medicine in the United States. Prevalence, costs, and patterns of use. New Engl J Med 1993; 328(4): 246-52) which addresses racial prevalence ("highest use reported by nonblack persons...").

Methodology and Results:

"A target of 50 surveys in each of the 6 clinics..." What is the rationality of this sample size? The questionnaire leaves many questions open. Was the questionnaire taken from previous studies? Was it designed ad hoc? Was any validation done? Did the patients understand all the terms?.

Page 9, last line – "The use of only the English language (to answer the questionnaire?) indicated an increased likelihood of herbal use..." I don’t understand this comment, I think that responders who did read English well like to answer the questionnaire in English.
In page 10, regarding the reasons for nondisclosure, the answers, "They [the provider] never asked" and "It wasn't important for them to know" are very important in terms of medical education for physicians and health education for the public. I believe the addition of a multivariate regression model where these issues are included as dependent variables would greatly enhance the value of the paper for BMC Medicine. The results could be presented in a table, with the related interpretation incorporated in the discussion.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
Discussion and conclusion:
Page 9, paragraph 2 – "We found an alarming number of herbal users (53%) who take herbal medicines and prescription medications concomitantly". It is unclear if the patients reported actual intake or only an opinion. This is not in the table, and should be clarified. Also, I suggest to change the word "alarming" to "high".

In the conclusions, do not suggest further studies that could be done with the data collected in the present study.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Which journal?: Appropriate or potentially appropriate for BMC Medicine: an article of importance in its field

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

None