Reviewer's report

Title: Perceived efficacy of herbal remedies by users accessing primary healthcare in Trinidad

Version: 1 Date: 28 October 2006

Reviewer: Dianne M Shumay

Reviewer's report:

General
This paper is a descriptive account of perceptions of efficacy by herb users in Trinidad. The paper is well-written, with sound sampling methods and provides descriptive information about herb use in Trinidad, but is of limited utility in its present form and possibly could contribute more significantly with some revisions. Suggestions below include ideas to expand the analysis and report more of the available data.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
1. In the abstract, the authors discuss the increasing use of herbs worldwide, but then in the introduction point out that herbs are "entrenched" in Trinidad culture. The authors do not need to emphasize the increasing use of herbs to justify their study and should present a consistent message based on the literature pertinent to Trinidad.

2. As it stands, the reader who is not familiar with Trinidad's public health clinics would not know whether the sample is representative of the public health clinic population as well as the greater Trinidad population.

3. The authors should look again at their statistical analysis approach. As it stands the number of planned comparisons would necessitate a statistical correction such as bonferroni's. The authors may also wish to consider employing a logistic or other regression analysis approach as discussed below.

4. Regarding nondisclosure to health professionals, the authors are urged to discuss cross-cultural studies of doctor-patient communication to propose potential barriers to disclosure that may have been at work here. As the authors conclude that healthcare providers need to know about herb use, it would be important to give some suggestions for improving such communication based upon the extensive empirical literature on the subject.

5. The authors might mention that one of the strengths of this study is the capturing of herbal use by a less-educated and lower income group. These groups are traditionally more difficult to survey and have not always been well represented in studies.

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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)
6. Table 4 correct the p value for years of formal education

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
7. I wonder if the difference for ethnicity on perceived efficacy in the chi square analysis would remain if the authors were able to control for education. The authors might consider employing a logistic regression analysis instead with perceived efficacy vs. non efficacy as a dichotomous variable. Their very good sample size would allow them to test a model with a good number of their available predictor variables.

8. Why limit the analysis to demographic variables. For example was there a difference on perceived efficacy by medical condition?

9. I think the authors have missed reporting some important interesting information that they have gathered. One suggestion is that they might consider reporting patterns of ethnic preferences for particular herbs if any and if they correspond to traditional healing methods. Also, how many herbs did participants use on
average? And what relationship was there between the number of herbs used and their views of efficacy as well as efficacy of herbs versus conventional treatment? What combination of herbs were common? (Herb/herb interactions can also be dangerous)

10. Was there a relationship between nondisclosure of herbal use to the doctor with noncompliance of conventional treatments? What percentage of those that had concomitant use of both conventional treatments and herbs disclosed to the doctor? What were the demographic variables linked to nondisclosure?

11. Given that participants are growing herbs in their gardens indicates that there is likely a community and cultural impetus for use rather than a corporate marketing influence as is the case in western countries where users primarily obtain commercially prepared herbal supplements. The authors should not discount this significant potential difference when comparing their results to other studies. If the authors look at the patterns of herb use by ethnicity as suggested above, they could then compare with previous studies of herb use in Trinidad to see if there is an increasing trend or a difference in types of herbs used.

12. Despite the introduction’s citing of studies showing increasing use of herbs in the developing world, I wonder if the author’s sample with primarily low educational attainment and low income, represents part of this increasing trend, or rather that they have used traditional approaches all along as passed on through the family and community. The authors may wish to comment on the history of accessible healthcare and utilization rates among this portion of the population, as homegrown herbal treatments may have until recently been the healthcare that has traditionally been available and affordable in the community.

13. I might argue that it is the use of conventional medications that is growing in this and every population worldwide rather than the herbal use, and that it is the growing concomitant use that is dangerous, as the authors point out. I think that the real story to be told with this very nice study, is that as populations around the world shift to western medical systems and pharmaceutical therapies become widespread and accessible for chronic conditions, people are not abandoning their traditional therapies but are using them alongside conventional care.

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

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests