Reviewer's report

Title: Herbal medicine use by surgery patients in Hungary: a descriptive study

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Reviewer: Declan Collins

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Herbal medicine use by surgery patients in Hungary: a descriptive study

Review

This paper looks at the use of herbal medicines in elective surgery patients in Hungary.

The title is clear and in the text (Methods paragraph “Study and Design”) the authors state “this survey is part of a complex study about the relationship of non-conventional therapies and perioperative care”. The text would therefore benefit from a clearly stated aim in the methods section placing this part of the study in context with the other work in progress or a one-line statement e.g. This study was designed to look at the prevalence and factors influencing herbal medicine use in elective surgery patients in Hungary. (Minor essential revision) At the moment the primary aim is in the discussion only.

The methods used are appropriate. The survey took the form of a prospective questionnaire given to patients. The study had ethical approval from the local ethics committee. The methods section should include the number of patients who were given the survey (2250) and could clarify whether these were all patients who attended the hospital or if there were any exclusions etc. (Minor essential revision).

The first background paragraph could do with some editing. The initial statement is fine “As the popularity of CAM is increasing worldwide, so is the use of herbal medications becoming more and more widespread “ as is the statement that CAM use in the USA is increasing and the use of herbal medicines is 12.1%. I would question the need for the references 2-4 as they talk only about CAM with no reference to herbal medicine. Although herbal medicines are included in most definitions of CAM it is not clear that from the text whether these papers are also suggesting an increase in herbal medicine use.

It would be better to say that CAM use is increasing (or being used) in a number of countries across the world (references 2, 3, 4 and 6) and this is frequently associated with herbal medicine use. One might therefore postulate that herbal medicine use is also being used increasingly frequently, therefore provoking the need for the study. The references regarding herbal medicine used in the second paragraph of the background could then be used. It would make a more coherent
narrative. (Discretionary Revisions)
More up-to-date references than 4 and 5 could also be used if possible. (Discretionary Revisions)

The data appears sound and the analysis correct and adequately reported.

Clarity is sought regarding one statement. In the results (paragraph-Prevalence of herbal medicine) the statement “out of these 3.6% (14 people) used it within two weeks prior to the operation, 3.6% (14 people) earlier than that” needs to be clearer. What is the point the authors are trying to convey?
Are the authors suggesting 14 patients started using the herbal medicines specifically because they were due to have an operation (i.e. to minimize side effects or improve the outcome of the operation) and the other 14 patients used it for more than two weeks and therefore used herbal medicines habitually? Or did the second group of 14 patients take herbal medicines some time in the past but not in the two weeks before the operation. It is not clear from the statement as it is written what the authors are trying to convey. (Major Compulsory Revision) This must also be made clear in the abstract.

The discussion is succinct. There are other points that might be raised in the discussion regarding limitations of the study.
For instance what the definition of a herbal medicine is. In Europe this has been defined by Law and there is clear guidance what can or cannot be called a medicine. Other parts of the world may have different definitions.

Although now impossible for this study it would interesting to note how may of the herbal remedies were self prescribed or prescribed by a ‘practitioner’ or if the prevalence differs much in the emergency surgery population.

Another limitation of the study is the response rate. The authors could also discuss further the reasons many people do not discuss or want to discuss herbal medicine use with their physicians (a number of papers have looked at this and it is relevant to any study about herbal medicine use) (Discretionary Revisions)

I am not sure tables 6 and 7 add anything to the paper and would be better suited to a review paper. I would suggest these are removed. (Discretionary Revisions)

Otherwise the discussion is fair and correctly acknowledges the guidance of the ASA.
The title is clear and the abstract will need to be changed in line with comments above.
The writing is acceptable except in the first paragraph of the background, should it be 1990s rather than 1990-ies? (Minor issues not for publication).

In conclusion whilst this does not add anything new to the literature on this subject in terms of the results, it is the first study of this kind in Hungary and therefore is a good effort in bench marking the current state of herbal medicine
use in this patient population and a useful contribution to the field. With the revisions suggested this paper could be published. I wish the team every success for their future work.