



Comfrey photographed by Smoobs, Flickr.com

A Fond Farewell

After 28 years of service, Healthnet's founder Alberta



Richetele is retiring. Her voice and presence will be missed. Although the Uconn Health Library staff is a tad green with envy, we wish Alberta well as she starts a new chapter in her life's adventure. You can get in touch with Alberta at: arichete@aol.com

Inside this issue:

What's in that bottle	1-4
The Science of sugar	4-5
Google search tip	6
Doctor finder tool	6
Substance abuse in Connecticut	7

HEALTHNET NEWS

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Just What's in That Bottle?

While browsing news feeds recently, I came across two stories that grabbed my attention. From *Health Day*: "Cancer doctors don't discuss herbs, supplements with patients" and from the *New York Times* "New York attorney general's office accuses four major retailers of selling fraudulent and potentially dangerous herbal supplements". Disconcerting? Scary? Medical librarians and consumer safety advocates would answer – Yes! Although herbs are natural (they grow in the wild) and are generally believed to be healthful (how about peppermint tea to settle an upset stomach?), our bodies view them as chemical substances with pharmacologic actions. Herbs can interact with other medications we take, and doctors need to know we are taking them. The dangers, however, escalate when we cannot be sure that the herbal product we ingest are what appears on the ingredient label.

Herbs and dietary supplements are BIG business; they are the most popular form of complementary therapy used by American adults. 18 percent of adults in the U.S. use herbs and supplements (Peregoy JA et al. Regional variation in use of complementary health approaches by U.S. adults. *NCHS Data Brief*; no. 146. April 2014.). This figure does not include vitamin or mineral supplements, homeopathic treatments, or consumption of herbal or green teas. Americans spend roughly \$5 billion annually on herbal supplements alone (New York Times "Herbal supplements are not what they seem" Annahad O'Connor, 11/3/2013) and, more than 1,000 companies worldwide make medicinal plant products worth more than \$60 billion a year (Newmaster SG, et al. DNA barcoding detects contamination and substitution in North American herbal products. *BMC Medicine*. 11(1): 222. 2013).

The *Health Day* story summarizes the findings of a national survey of U.S. oncologists regarding their knowledge and attitudes about herb and supplement use by their patients. 41 percent of the responding oncologists admitted they do not initiate discussions with their patients because they lack knowledge and education about this complementary treatment. Further, these oncologists admitted to allowing their patients to undergo chemotherapy knowing they were taking herbs and/or supplements. This is worrisome because some herbs (e.g. St. John's Wart, Panax ginseng, and green tea) have been found to have toxicities and to interact adversely with medications, including chemotherapy agents (Lee, Richard et al. Journal of

Continued next page

What's in that bottle, continued

of Clinical Oncology. "National Survey of Patterns Regarding Herb and Supplement Use by Patients with Cancer" 32 (36):4095-4101. Dec 20, 2014). Although herbs are "natural" they are not necessarily safe or healthful. According to the National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements, the safety of an herb depends on many things including its chemical makeup, how it works in the body, how it is prepared, and the dose used. A quick review of herbal monographs in the drug database *Lexicomp* demonstrates that herbs interact with many other medications besides chemotherapy drugs.

To make matters worse, as the New York attorney general discovered, supplements we purchase (even at reputable businesses) may not contain the ingredients on their labels. The New York attorney general's office conducted tests of top-selling store brands of herbal supplements at GNC, Target, Walgreens and Walmart. Shockingly, they found that four out of five of the products tested did not contain any of the herbs on their labels. Most of the samples tested proved to be little more than cheap fillers like rice and houseplants, and sometimes contained substances which could be dangerous to people with allergies.



The New York Attorney general's office started its investigation after reading about a similar study conducted at the University of Guelph (Newmaster, S. et al.). The University of Guelph study found the majority of herbal products on the market contained ingredients not listed on the label and most manufacturers substituted cheaper alternatives and used fillers. Using DNA barcoding technology, the authors found nearly 60 percent of the herbal products contained plant species not listed on the label. Substitution was found in 32 percent of the samples; 20 percent of the samples included fillers like wheat, rice and soybeans not listed on the label. Several products were contaminated with plants known to be toxic, have side effects, or interact negatively with other herbs, supplements, or medications.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has little regulatory authority over herbal and nutritional supplements. In the United States, herbs and nutritional supplements are regulated by the FDA as food. Under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, herbs and nutritional supplements do not have to meet the same strict standards as prescription and over the counter drugs for proof of safety, effectiveness and good manufacturing practices. Further, in the U.S., there is no legal definition of "standardized," "certified," or "verified." The label for an herbal supplement is not an indication of the quality of that product.

Timothy Egan's *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, "Stupid Pills: The Politics of Fraudulent Dietary Supplements" (February 6, 2015), provides background about how politicians weakened our government's ability to protect consumers from harm caused by nutritional supplements. In his piece, he quotes an American Cancer Society official as saying: "There's a lot of wrong information out there... Even for the well-informed, it can be hard to find reliable information about the safe use and potential risks of dietary supplements." Where can librarians direct patrons who are looking for reliable information about herbal preparations? Here are some suggestions. The Uconn Health Library subscribes to those services noted with an asterisk.



What's in that bottle, continued

Reliable Internet Resources on Herbal Therapies

American Botanical Council (<http://abc.herbalgram.org>)

ABC provides reliable, up-to-date information about herbs based on modern science and traditional wisdom. Their publications are peer-reviewed and include periodicals, books, safety reviews, continuing education materials and searchable online databases.

Center for Traditional Medicine (<http://www.centerfortraditionalmedicine.org>)

Learn about medicinal plants and traditional medicine healers in Vietnam, China, the South Pacific and other countries or regions around the world. You can also access the World Health Organization's monographs on selected medicinal plants.

ConsumerLab (<http://www.consumerlab.com>)*

Provides independent testing, quality ratings and comparisons of hundreds of vitamins, supplements and other health products.

Herb Research Foundation (www.herbs.org)

A non-profit research organization dedicated to educating the public the safe, effective use of herbs and other natural products for health promotion and natural healing.

Longwood Herbal Taskforce (www.longwoodherbal.org)

This organization provides introductory articles about herbal medicine, in-depth monographs of herbs and supplements, summaries for clinicians, and patient fact sheets.

MedlinePlus (www.medlineplus.gov)

Provides monographs on over 100 herbs and supplements. Monographs include evidence-based, peer-reviewed data and selected illustrations.

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center for Integrative Medicine (www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine)

MSK's write-ups include scientific and common names, summary of clinical uses, sources, purported uses, constituents, mechanisms of action, contraindications, adverse reactions, herb-drug interactions, summaries of the literature, and references. You can download a mobile app version of their herbal database.

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (<http://nccih.nih.gov>)

Formerly the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, the NCCIH is the federal government's leading agency for scientific research on complementary and integrative therapies.

Natural Medicines (<https://naturalmedicines.therapeuticresearch.com/>)*

Previously two separate databases: Natural Standard and Natural Medicines Comprehensive database. Natural Medicines offers evidence-based information about herbs, dietary supplements, alternative medicines, vitamins and mineral supplements. Each substance is given a grade which reflects the level of available scientific data for or against its use to treat a specific medical condition.

Nutrition.gov (<http://www.nutrition.gov>)

Provides fact sheets on botanicals and herbals which review functions, food sources and recommendations on how to take them. Background information on botanicals is also provided and includes definitions, regulations, claims, labeling, health benefits and safety.

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What's in that bottle, continued

Herbal Books for Your Reference Shelf

Braun Lesley. (2015) *Herbs and natural supplements: An evidence-based guide*, 4th ed. 2-volume set. Churchill Livingstone. ISBN 978-0729553841

Gardner, Z. and McGuffin, M. (2013). *American Herbal Products Association's Botanical Safety Handbook*, 2nd ed, CRC Press. ISBN 978-1466516946

Gladstar, R. (2012). *Rosemary Gladstar's medicinal herbs : a beginner's guide*. North Adams MA: Storey Pub., LLC. ISBN 978-1612120058

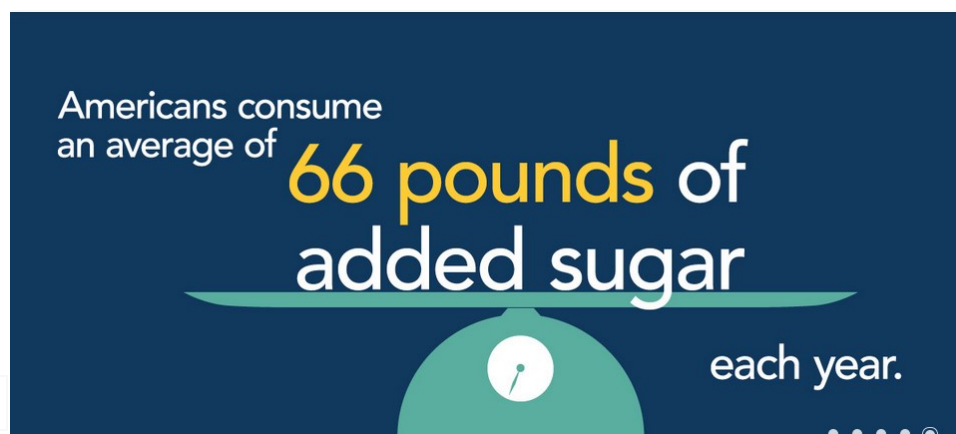
Moerman, D. (2009). *Native American medicinal plants : an ethnobotanical dictionary*. Timber Press, abridged edition, (2009). ISBN 978-0881929874

Pharmaceutical Press, ed.(2014) *Herbal Medicines*, 4th ed. Pharmaceutical Press. ISBN 978-0857110350

A Website You Can Be “Sweet On“

In February, our country's Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee issued new dietary recommendations. Restrictions were eased on fat and cholesterol in our diet, and sharp new limits on sugar were added. As New York Times columnist, Anahad O'Connor noted in a story on the guidelines, “the real bad egg is sugar” (New York Times, 2/20/15, pg A13). Since the guidelines were first issued in 1980, Americans have been encouraged to eat a low-fat, low-salt diet. But, foods that are low in fat and salt can taste bland. Food companies responded by replacing fat and salt with loads of sugar.

Today, the average American consumes 22 to 30 teaspoons of added sugar daily. (The amount recommended by the American Heart Association is no more than 6 teaspoons for women and 9 teaspoons for men.) Diets rich in added sugar can lead to obesity as well as heart disease, diabetes, and liver disease — chronic diseases which are among the leading causes of death worldwide (Lozano, R. et al. Global and regional mortality from 235 causes of death for 20 age groups in 1990 and 2010: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2010. *The Lancet*, 380(9859), 2095-2128. 2013).



SurgarScience.org


A Website You Can Be “Sweet On “, continued

Those of us who are parents are also familiar with other evils linked to sugar. Sugar can cause hyperactivity and tooth decay. High fructose corn syrup is more harmful than table sugar. And, artificial sweeteners may be more harmful than the added sugars they replace. What’s fact and what’s fiction? Here is where I make my pitch for a wonderful, science-based website to help us sort through the truths and myths surrounding sugar.

“SugarScience” (www.SugarScience.org) is an authoritative source for evidence about sugar and its impact on our health. The site is staffed by a team of health scientists at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF). The researchers review the medical and scientific literature around sugar and disease and explain it to the public so we can make informed, healthy choices about sugar. The website allows you to read about the latest evidence-based research on overconsumption of sugar. A feature, “Ask the SugarScientists” tackles consumer questions, (many which require extensive research), then post the answers. Recently answered questions covered the safety of stevia as an alternative to sugar; the differences between glucose, fructose, sucrose and lactose; whether overconsumption of sugar lead to cancer; and whether sugar can cause hyperactivity in children.

SugarScience is fun to browse. Colorful infographics and pop-up boxes serve up easy-to-digest sugar facts. Clicking on the graphics takes to you concise articles offering more information about the health effects of sugar. Finally, for those of you who want to make “health happen in libraries”, you can explore the SugarScience Resource Kit. The kit offers infographics which can be edited to add your library name and used as flyers or posters. It includes banner ads and home page images you can use on your library website. There are also public service announcements, fact sheets, logos, and pocket cards. How cool is that!!

SugarScience.org is my new go-to resource for untangling messages about added sugar in our diet. It will certainly become one of my recommendations for public health students or organizations wishing to improve the health of adults and children in their communities.



For more information about the new 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans:

Health.gov (<http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report>) Read the Committee’s full report.

Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health . “The science behind the new dietary guidelines report “ (<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/features/the-science-behind-the-new-dietary-guidelines-report>)

HealthDay “U.S. Dietary Guidelines Take Aim at Sugar” (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory_151070.html)

SugarScience.org “A step in the right direction” (<http://tinyurl.com/lf64jh4>)

Improve Google Search Results on Health Topics

Search any health topic on Google, and you are likely to end up with thousands of results. Many government websites might be good starting points for questions about vaccination, contagious diseases, drugs, or special diets. But searching sites like the Food and Drug Administration can be an exercise in frustration. Here is a tip for finding information on health topics from government agencies (federal, state, and municipal) quickly using Google. It involves using Google’s “Advanced Search.” feature.

Google’s Advanced Search is a little tricky to find. Go to the Google search page, and look at the lower right corner of your screen. You should see the link “Settings”. Click on “Settings” to get to the Advanced Search page. Once there, you will discover many ways to refine, and streamline your search to quickly find more relevant results. If you have a phrase, (e.g. attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity, congestive heart failure) type your phrase in the box labeled “Find this exact word or phrase”. Next restrict your search results to government websites. You can do this by typing “gov” in the “Site or domain” box in the lower half of the search page. If you have a drug or medical device topic (e.g. defibrillator, mitral valve) you can specify a specific government agency, like fda.gov. Finally, click the blue “advanced search” button on the bottom of the search page and be impressed by the results you retrieve!



U.S. News and World Report Doctor Finder

You know that U.S. News and World Report rates colleges and hospitals. But did you know that they also offer a nation-wide database of physicians you can browse by specialty and geographic region? Although the doctors listed are not “ranked”, you will find details about the physician’s education, training, certifications, and licensure. Each biographical profile also includes years in practice, specialties and qualifications, hospital affiliations, languages spoken, types of health insurance accepted, and directions for finding his/her practice. At the end of the profile are links to other “similar” doctors nearby. The site’s editors explain that the listings are not exhaustive, and that physicians are not recommended by their peers for inclusion, nor voted best-in-their-specialty by their patients.

The image shows a screenshot of the "U.S. News & World Report DOCTOR FINDER" website. At the top left is the "U.S. News & World Report" logo, and to its right is the text "DOCTOR FINDER" in large blue letters. Below this, a line of text reads "Our Doctor Finder includes most U.S. physicians." There are two buttons: "by Specialty" and "by Name". Below these is a dropdown menu labeled "Pick a Specialty". At the bottom left is a text input field labeled "City, State, or ZIP". At the bottom right is a large orange button labeled "Find Doctors »".

The goal of the database is to provide consumers with information needed to objectively compare/contrast physicians. What would improve the Doctor Finder, would be a link to state departments of public health where consumers can investigate sanctions or legal actions taken against physicians. Connecticut’s Department of Public Health (DPH) offers a “Physician Profile” service. The service indicates whether physicians have an active Connecticut license, and have ever been sued. The link to the DPH physician profile is: <http://tinyurl.com/q8cylf3>.

Behavioral Health Data for Connecticut

Are you looking for current statistics for alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug abuse and dependence for Connecticut's teens and adults? Take a look at *Behavioral Health Barometer: Connecticut, 2013* published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The report is one in a series of state and national reports that provide a snapshot of behavioral health in the United States. There are numerous graphs comparing use, dependence, and perception of harm for marijuana, cigarettes, alcohol, opiates, and illicit drugs.

There are also charts depicting state and national rates of depression, serious mental illness, thought of suicide, and treatment for mental health. You can find the Connecticut "barometer" on SAMHSA's website at: <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/Connecticut-BHBarometer.pdf>



How Can We Help?

HEALTHNET offers a variety of services to Connecticut libraries and the communities they support. We offer FREE, customized research for state residents who have personal health and wellness questions. We also conduct health literacy training for library staff and the public; consult with libraries about health information resources and services; and provide article delivery service to residents and health professionals in the state.

Are you scheduling a "Health Happens in Libraries" event? If so, you can invite a HEALTHNET librarian to be part of your event. We can also provide you with brochures, bookmarks, or other resources to use at these events, or to display at your reference desk or post on your community bulletin board.

Thank you to those librarians who have share their comments with us about past newsletter articles. Please keep those comments and suggestions coming! Are there health topics you would like to learn more about? Email or call us. We would love to hear from you.

Cheers!
Wendy

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