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# Herbal medicine: a practical guide for medical practitioners

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## Book Review

### Herbal medicine: a practical guide for medical practitioners

Graham Pinn Blackwell Publishing, Carlton, 2003.  
174pp. ISBN 0867934328. Price A\$49.45

The continuing growth in consumption of complementary and alternative therapies, in particular herbal medicines, makes this book a useful reference for general practice. It is written by a medical practitioner for medical practitioners. In fact, the book is based on a series of articles written by the author for *Australian Family Physician*. The author has set out to provide a relevant summary of the evidence base for the clinical indications of commonly used herbal medicines. He succeeds admirably in achieving this goal. The author's background in both herbal and medical practice has resulted in a well balanced overview of both traditional and evidence-based applications of herbal medicines

The opening chapter provides a context for herbal medicines as the author explores the link between plant medicines and pharmaceutical medications. While many other books present herbal medicines simply as replacements for pharmaceuticals, Dr Pinn explores, albeit briefly, the traditional rationale for use of the herbs, providing context for their modern applications. In subsequent chapters, Dr Pinn addresses each organ system, presenting an overview of the herbal medicines used for the treatment of specific disease conditions. The author systematically reviews the relevant conventional therapies derived from herbal therapies, and contrasts the evidence-based herbal therapies with the non-proven herbal therapies. It is worth noting, however, that at this point the author does not discuss which plants are on the poisons register or are scheduled substances. One must read further for this type of information. A discussion of toxicity is provided at the end of each chapter and again in the concluding chapters.

The appeal of this book for medical practitioners lies in the quality of the referencing and its depth. The

author has presented in one easy-to-read volume a summary of widespread herbal approaches to treatment, reviewed the levels of evidence for their prescription and provided a good overview of the application of these medicines. There are numerous texts available which attempt to summarise the practice of herbal medicine into one volume. These books, while not valuable to the expert reader, do serve the purpose of providing clinical guidelines if the information they contain is well researched. Unfortunately, all too often such books are poorly referenced. This is not the case with this book written by Graham Pinn. As the title claims, it is a practical easy-to-use reference, it provides a number of easy-to-use and informative tables and the information is placed within an Australian context where relevant.

If the book has a weakness, it is this same breadth. The book provides a useful overview of reasons patients may be using specific herbal medicines. The summary, provided in the final chapter, of herbals with a good evidence base is particularly interesting, but the level of detail in the book is probably not sufficient to make prescribing decisions. Readers will, however, find the dosage table with reference to Australian brand products very useful.

In the current environment when bookstores are lined with a panoply of herbal medicine guides, this one provides a balanced review of herbal therapies and the type of information that may be useful to a medical practitioner. It discusses plant medicines from a pharmacological perspective, exploring known pharmacodynamics of various plant chemicals and relevant clinical trials. It is an enjoyable read from cover to cover, for those interested, and a useful text that can be opened randomly at any chapter for reference.

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