This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30065330

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2014, ADEA
Complementary and Alternative Medicine: How Reliable is the Information?

Trisha Dunning

Introduction

Complementary and alternative medicines/therapies (CAM) are the mainstream of health care in many countries and are an important but underestimated part of health care (World Health Organisation (WHO) 2013–2023). Many countries are beginning to recognise the need for and value of developing evidence-based integrative care models that can improve access to health care. In fact, an International Network of Integrative Health was established in 2010 to address integrative mental health. The Network subsequently produced a white paper on the issue on the basis that some CAM are beneficial for common medical and psychiatric conditions.

Over 50% of Australians use CAM and people with diabetes are high CAM users. Most people self-diagnose and self-prescribe, others consult CAM practitioners, and some ask conventional practitioners about using CAM. Thus, it is important for conventional practitioners and people with diabetes to be able to determine whether CAM practitioners are qualified and competent to provide advice and to discuss the efficacy, benefits and risks associated with CAM use and of combining CAM and conventional medicines.

As indicated, some CAM are effective and safe for example whole system approaches such as Traditional Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda, mind-body approaches, medicines such as S-adenosyl methionine (SAMe), adjunctive nutrients such as Omega 3 and folic acid, and kava and acupuncture for anxiety. Mindfulness meditation and prescriptive lifestyle medicine also have a strong evidence-base when used alone or in combination. Despite these positives, evidence is still lacking for many CAM. One of the problems is the lack of funding for CAM research, which hampers the ability to generate evidence.

Education, Research and Regulation

Openness between CAM and conventional practitioners is increasing. Some CAM education programs are of high quality, which could reflect the response to professional and public concerns about CAM practitioner training, the increased public demand for CAM and the trend towards self-determination.

Some CAM and conventional practitioners undertake training in each other’s fields. Although such training might not be sufficient to enable practitioners to deliver care, it does enable them to provide basic information, which enables them to help individuals choose, or in some cases refer them to competent CAM practitioners. Significantly, CAM, and many conventional practitioners, as well as people with diabetes lack research training and are unable to determine the validity of the evidence/information presented on the Internet and other media sources.

The CAM industry in Australia is largely self-regulated, but some state and national government regulatory processes apply to CAM. Most CAM practitioners belong to one or more relevant CAM professional associations and many of these professional associations require practitioners to meet certain education standards and to engage in continuing professional development programs to maintain membership: but membership is voluntary. People can undertake CAM training programs that do not meet professional standards, and, although they can be useful for informed self-care, they are inadequate for professional practice.

Significantly, inadequate practitioner training is as much a concern for CAM as it is for conventional practitioners and regulatory bodies. Conventional practitioners and people with diabetes are within their rights to ask CAM practitioners about their qualifications and membership of professional associations as one way of ascertaining practitioner knowledge and competence. For example, Chinese medical practitioners, Chinese herbal medicine practitioners and acupuncturists are legally obliged to register with the Chinese Medicine Registration Board in Victoria.
Information Sources

An ever-increasing amount of information about CAM is available from a range of sources including the Internet, media, family and friends. Of particular concern is the growing amount of CAM misinformation, especially on the Internet, and in the media including 'consumer magazines,' where articles are frequently written by contributors with none or limited CAM or conventional qualifications. Such information has been referred to as 'cyberquackery.'

Questions to consider when accessing information about CAM

Some useful websites contain reliable, objective advice about CAM: see Box 1 over page 24. Websites that advertise and sell products/services often use subjective, highly selective information in 'advertorial' language rather than objective information about products/services. Such practices can represent an actual or potential conflict of interest when people recommend and sell a product from the same site.

Products manufactured in other countries may not be subject to the same safety and quality control regulations and labeling requirements as products made in Australia. Labels might contain important information about the product but they are often written in very small font and technical language that the general public does not understand; which discourages people from reading the information.

The following information is based on the Australian Better Health Channel recommendations about issues to consider when reading CAM information or buying CAM products. People must be able to judge the quality and validity of the information and/or know where and how to seek advice before buying. The questions below are equally important when reading other CAM information on websites.

- Is there a clear statement about who is responsible for the content on a website's home page? Be wary of anonymous information.
- Are the responsible person's qualifications/credentials clearly stated?
- Are the qualifications verifiable?
- Is it possible to contact the people responsible for the website by telephone, email or mail?
- Is the website sponsored? If so, are the sponsors named and do they appear to have any actual or potential conflict of interest?
- Do the sponsors influence the content? The sponsor's role should be clearly stated and any conflict of interest declared. Websites that sell products/services might have a conflict of interest. Likewise, practitioners who both prescribe and sell products have a conflict of interest.
- Is the advertisement for the product/service clearly differentiated from the information/evidence about the product/service?
- Do advertisements and 'give aways' obscure important text?
- Is the information consistent or are there inconsistencies within the content?
- Does the information outline the risks as well as the benefits of the product/service and describe what is involved in using the product or service?
- Is there enough information to enable you to form an opinion about the quality of the evidence used to support health claims?
- Can the information be verified in an independent source? For example, is any research in reputable peer-reviewed publications cited to support the claims?
- Is the information current? Does the website state when the information was last revised? Is there a process to regularly review the information and the website?
- Will any personal or health information that people provide on the website be protected?

References:

Questions to consider when accessing information about CAM

Some useful websites contain reliable, objective advice about CAM: see Box 1 over page 24. Websites that advertise and sell products/services often use subjective, highly selective information in 'advertorial' language rather than objective information about products/services. Such practices can represent an actual or potential conflict of interest when people recommend and sell a product from the same site.

Products manufactured in other countries may not be subject to the same safety and quality control regulations and labeling requirements as products made in Australia. Labels might contain important information about the product but they are often written in very small font and technical language that the general public does not understand; which discourages people from reading the information.

The following information is based on the Australian Better Health Channel recommendations about issues to consider when reading CAM information or buying CAM products. People must be able to judge the quality and validity of the information and/or know where and how to seek advice before buying. The questions below are equally important when reading other CAM information on websites.

- Is there a clear statement about who is responsible for the content on a website’s home page? Be wary of anonymous information.
- Are the responsible person’s qualifications/credentials clearly stated?
- Are the qualifications verifiable?
- Is it possible to contact the people responsible for the website by telephone, email or mail?
- Is the website sponsored? If so, are the sponsors named and do they appear to have any actual or potential conflict of interest?
- Do the sponsors influence the content? The sponsor’s role should be clearly stated and any conflict of interest declared. Websites that sell products/services might have a conflict of interest. Likewise, practitioners who both prescribe and sell products have a conflict of interest.
- Is the advertisement for the product/service clearly differentiated from the information/evidence about the product/service?
- Do advertisements and ‘give aways’ obscure important text?
- Is the information consistent or are there inconsistencies within the content?
- Does the information outline the risks as well as the benefits of the product/service and describe what is involved in using the product or service?
- Is there enough information to enable you to form an opinion about the quality of the evidence used to support health claims?
- Can the information be verified in an independent source? For example, is any research in reputable peer-reviewed publications cited to support the claims?
- Is the information current? Does the website state when the information was last revised? Is there a process to regularly review the information and the website?
- Will any personal or health information that people provide on the website be protected?

References:
Other Issues to Consider

Websites should be easy to navigate and health information needs to be easy to read and understand and culturally relevant. The font, design, colours and layout should suit the target audience. Jargon and unexplained acronyms are misleading and confusing. Some sites redirect readers to other sites they do not intend to visit, which can confuse decision-making. It is important to read the 'fine' print and disclaimers.

BOX:

Some reliable websites that contain CAM information.
- Better Health Channel Australia: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Cochrane Collaboration Complementary Health Field: www.cochrane.org/.../topic-list-cochrane-complementary-medicine-field-related-reviews-cochraneorg and www.compmed.umm.edu/cochrane_about.asp

National Diabetes Week – 13 to 19 July 2014

Each year Diabetes Australia and other diabetes organisations celebrate National Diabetes Week to raise awareness about diabetes in Australia. Call your local state or territory NDSS Agent on 1300 136 588 to find out more about what will be happening near you during National Diabetes Week.

Do you need NDSS products or health advice?

The NDSS has over 4,000 Access Points to assist you to access products and services quickly and easily. NDSS Access Points are generally community pharmacies. The Online Services Directory has maps to help you find your nearest Access Point, and lists their contact details. Go to osd.ndss.com.au

The Online Services Directory also provides a list of health professionals who can assist you in the management of your diabetes. The Directory assists you to search for doctors, Endocrinologists, Credentialled Diabetes Educators, Dietitians, Podiatrists and other health professionals throughout Australia.

You can also access products, services and advice from your local NDSS Agent. Call the NDSS Infoline on 1300 136 588. This number will connect you to the Agent of the state or territory from which you are calling for the cost of a local call.

NDSS Agents are in each State and Territory:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Agent Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Diabetes ACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Healthy Living NT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Diabetes Queensland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Australian Diabetes Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>Diabetes Australia - Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Diabetes SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>Diabetes Tasmania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Diabetes WA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Product Changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Deletions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Code</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more information, please check the product and supply section on the NDSS website at ndss.com.au