

Book Review

The Complementary and Alternative Medicine Information Source Book**Ka wai Fan**Chinese Civilisation Center, City University of Hong Kong, Tat Chi Avenue, Kowloon Tang, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Alan M. Rees (ed.). *The Complementary and Alternative Medicine Information Source Book*. Oryx Press, Westport, CT, 2001. ISBN: 1-57356-388-9.

During the past decade, American doctors and patients have increasingly come to rely on complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Still, this highly heterogeneous collection of therapies remains unfamiliar to many people. Consumers, medical librarians and professional health researchers have a pressing need for reliable and authoritative information they can consult before making important medical decisions. Edited by Alan Rees, *The Complementary and Alternative Medicine Information Source Book* does much to satisfy that need, identifying books and pamphlets, journals, newsletters, Internet resources, CD-ROM databases, and several hundred organizations and Web sites devoted to CAM. Undoubtedly, the book is a very good guide for anyone seeking printed and electronic information on CAM.

The book has nine sections. The first, 'Complementary and Alternative Medicine: A New Dimension in Medical Consumerism', provides a definition of CAM, explains the circumstances when CAM is appropriate, surveys current research on such issues as safety and the relationship between mainstream medicine and CAM, cites some of the criticism of alternative medicine and discusses the availability of information.

The second section, 'The Best of CAM Information Resources', lists 61 books, magazines, newsletters, online and CD-ROM databases, Internet sites, and several kinds of personal health software, for both laypersons and professionals. Resources are assigned grades according to a number of criteria, including authority, credibility, comprehensiveness, readability, ease of use and the provision of further sources of information.

The third section, 'CAM Resource Organizations', offers a list of educational, professional, academic and governmental

organizations, institutes, foundations and centers, together with detailed contact information and URLs.

The fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh sections provide information about, respectively, magazines and newsletters, pamphlets, professional books and periodicals, and CD-ROMs.

The eighth section, 'CAM Sources on the Internet', is a very important part of the book because in recent years the Internet has been flooded by information on the subject and some guidance has become crucial. Not only does the author of this section, Tom Flemming, describe a variety of both comprehensive and specialized CAM Web sites, he even grades them. He also discusses how to evaluate and use CAM Web sites, summarizes education about and use of CAM, comments on online databases, and speculates about the future of CAM on the Internet.

The ninth section, 'Popular Books on CAM', reviews 350 titles published since 1998.

The book's appendices provide general information about alternative medicine and the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine reproduced from the center's exemplary Web site.

This book is highly recommended. It not only contains a great deal of information, it also discusses key issues in searching for and applying information about CAM, organized to suit the needs non-specialist readers. The outstanding qualities of the book are outlined below.

- (i) *Informative*. The book provides a great deal of information, ranging from professional to popular publications, acupuncture to Ayurvedic medicine, body-mind interventions to herbal medicine, various diseases to health care.
- (ii) *Comprehensive*. While the World Wide Web is one of the most effective ways of disseminating information nowadays, not all CAM information is readily available online. Any guide to CAM must, if it hopes to be comprehensive or even representative, describe both printed and electronic materials. In this, *The Complementary*

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and *Alternative Medicine Information Source Book* is exemplary.

- (iii) *Detailed.* All of the professional books, CD-ROMs and Web sites treated in the book are richly described and evaluated. Shrewdly, the editor has labored to trace the Web sites' sponsors, a critical factor in assessing the reliability of the information provided.
- (iv) *Practical.* The table of contents and index clearly guide readers to the information they want. The criteria used for evaluating Web sites are explicit and transparent, providing a model that consumers can apply in evaluating CAM Web sites themselves.

Anyone planning to search for information about alternative therapies can benefit from the book. In closing, I would like to suggest three ways in which the book might be improved.

First, the book inevitably involves a certain amount of redundancy. Sections 2, 3, 4, 7 and 9 overlap. All of the resources mentioned in section 2 are also included in other sections. Is a section devoted exclusively to 'the best of' CAM information resources necessary? Given that the resources are

not described in this section, the answer could well be no. Secondly, the Web sites of magazines, newsletters and journals both popular and professional should be listed. This would provide consumers with ready access to the periodicals' news, tables of contents, past issues and submission guidelines. Thirdly, the book does nothing to alleviate a general problem: when searching for information about CAM, consumers have to struggle with unfamiliar terminology, concepts and therapies often decorated with a quasi-scientific frosting. How could we overcome these difficulties?

Generally speaking, consumers do not learn about alternative medicine from conventional medical doctors. They obtain information from the Internet, from friends and other consumers. The landscape is plastered with biased, non-scientific and commercial information about a herb or a massage that will cure all troubles. Few consumers have enough scientific knowledge to choose appropriate therapies. While the book under review offers a range of tools to inform yourself about a confusing and vast field of knowledge, please consult your doctor and other health professionals before choosing any therapy.