

### “Natural” information

Natural medicine comprehensive database. Third edition. Jeff M Jellin et al, editors. Stockton, California: Therapeutic Research Faculty, 2000 (1529 pp, \$182, Web Version \$182 pa. Both versions \$261). <http://www.naturaldatabase.com>. ISBN 0-9676136-4-7.

AS ITS NAME SUGGESTS, this resource is very comprehensive. It covers approximately 1200 herbs and natural substances that are used therapeutically. The layout of each monograph is clear, making it easy to locate specific information. If little is known about a natural medicine the database will still include a monograph and clearly acknowledge the lack of information.

The hardcopy version (printed annually) can be used alone or in conjunction with the web version. All information is updated on a daily basis by the editorial team, comprising pharmacists, physicians, researchers, dietitians and pharmacologists, who regularly scan a wealth of medical journals.

A practical system is employed to summarise evidence for the efficacy of substances in specific conditions and safety for different uses of products, including different routes of administration. As well as interactions between the natural medicine and drugs, interactions with other herbs or dietary substances, foods, laboratory tests and diseases or conditions are included.

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### Water-wings for new researchers

Health science research. A handbook of quantitative methods. Jennifer K Peat, Katrina Williams, Wei Xuan and Craig Mellis. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2001 (\$45, xiv + 313 pp). ISBN 1 86508 365 8.

FOR MANY OF US, entry into research is an experience that goes something like this: the grey, wizened supervisor shows us around the glorious lakeside office, leads us by the hand to the water's edge, invites us to survey the horizon, ostensibly to contemplate our future, then pushes us in, yelling “Swim or sink!”. Some of us make it back to shore; many don't and few find the experience pleasant.

Enter Jennifer Peat, who has compiled what amounts to a training manual for beginning researchers. She has called it a “handbook” and it certainly lives up to this claim. It is written in a straightforward manner and from an operational perspective. The book's structure makes it easy for readers to apply the material to their own fields, and the novice researcher will appreciate the way in which Peat and colleagues are able to distil significant points.

This book differs from similar texts on the market in two ways. First, the authors have a broad, first-hand knowledge and experience of research conducted in the Australian context. Second, this is one of the few books of research methodology that is built around the principles of evidence-based practice (EBP). Other books have tended to skirt the issue — the authors embrace it with a vengeance and in doing so make the book more relevant as the EBP paradigm gains acceptance.

The database could be considered conservative in places. For example, the vitamin A monograph indicates that less than 5000IU should be ingested daily during pregnancy, whereas the USA daily limit that is more widely quoted is 8000IU.

It is a United States resource but nevertheless valuable in other countries. The facility of checking ingredients of specific brand name products via an index at the back of the book can be useful either for imported products or those that have been the subject of case reports in the literature. It is thoroughly referenced; several charts summarise information such as interactions; and the main index allows the user to look up either scientific names or more familiar common names for plants/chemicals.

To say “this is the most comprehensive, scientifically-based, and practical database on natural medicines available anywhere” is no idle boast, but to a health professional who has accessed it regularly for at least two years it has proven to be invaluable as well as reasonably priced.

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However, before you all go out and purchase the book, realise that its strength is also its weakness. In providing a broad overview of research in the health sciences, the authors do not provide much depth. For instance, there is only a paragraph on equipoise. Data management issues are contained in a six-page chapter.

The issue, then, becomes one of expectation. If you're after a book that offers an overview of current quantitative research methods in the health sciences, you'll find the information here. But if you're after a substantive exposition of a specific aspect of research, go somewhere else.

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