

David J. Owen, MLS, PhD

The Herbal Internet Companion *Herbs and Herbal Medicine Online*



Pre-publication REVIEWS, COMMENTARIES, EVALUATIONS . . .

"This book is a must-have for anyone serious about herbs and herbal medicine. It takes the mystery and confusion out of the navigation through the excessive amounts of information about herbs on the Internet. Anyone seeking consistent, quality information on herbs and herbal medicines should have this book as part of his or her reference library."

Constance Grauds, RPh
*President,
Association of Natural Medicine
Pharmacists,
San Raphael, California*

"Finally, someone has written a concise, referenced, unbiased, and thorough guide to navigating the

Internet for information on herbs. This book is knowledgeable and factual, avoiding hyperbole, and plunging straight for the truth. It contains sixteen chapters, each of which presents a concise overview of the subject, followed by a listing and brief discussion of Web sites. Each Web site is described as to its origin and its utility, with a frank discussion of its strengths or limitations.

The author is quite frank in his presentation of useful criteria for the selection of herbal Internet sites. I was very impressed by the thorough, unbiased, and reader-friendly approach and I consider this book an absolute must for anyone, professional or lay, seeking meaningful sources of herbal information on the Internet. I most strongly recommend it."

Paul L. Schiff Jr., PhD
*Professor of Pharmaceutical Sciences,
School of Pharmacy,
University of Pittsburgh,
Pennsylvania*



More pre-publication

REVIEWS, COMMENTARIES, EVALUATIONS . . .

"All Internet/computer-literate persons with a serious interest in herbs and herbal medicine will warmly welcome Dr. Owen's exciting new book. This reading audience will include practicing herbalists and teachers of botanical medicine and alternative medicine in general, as well as librarians working with significant holdings in herbal medicine in particular, or with substantial holdings in alternative medicine in general. And, of course, this audience naturally will include many other students of herbs and herbalism. This book is also especially timely and badly needed, for there is at present no other single, current source that even comes close to providing so much electronic research help on these botanical subjects. Dr. Owen's book also has a wealth of related, more practical information, such as where to find those herbal chat

rooms and elusive botanical bulletin boards. Although the focus is certainly on Web research of herbs and herbal medicine, this book should also be of some use for electronic research in alternative medicine in general, or naturopathy. Nor is the information presented here strictly limited to American interests and concerns, for Web sites done in (or about) other English-speaking countries are also well represented. *The Herbal Internet Companion* is an exceptionally well-balanced and practical guidebook for all serious herbal researchers as well as others with related interests."

D. Bryan Stansfield, PhD, MLS

*Library Director,
Southwest College
of Naturopathic Medicine
and Health Sciences,
Tempe, Arizona*



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**The Herbal Internet
Companion**
*Herbs and Herbal
Medicine Online*

The Herbal Internet Companion

Herbs and Herbal Medicine Online

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To my parents, and my sister Christine,
in gratitude for their love and support;
to Warren Kennell and David Dickson for their friendship;
to Miss Collins for her wisdom, guidance, and encouragement;
and to the loving memory of my sister Veronica.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David J. Owen, PhD, is Education Coordinator/Librarian for the Basic Sciences in the Library and Center for Knowledge Management at the University of California, San Francisco. He also holds an appointment as Assistant Clinical Professor in the UCSF School of Pharmacy.

Dr. Owen holds a bachelor's degree in the biological sciences, a PhD in microbiology, and a master's degree in library and information science. Before moving to UCSF, he worked as an information specialist for biotechnology companies. He has published in both scientific and library journals.

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Preface

Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.

Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

One of the most remarkable developments in recent years has been the reemergence in the United States of medical therapies and procedures commonly referred to as “alternative medicine.” To the consternation of many health care providers, medical practices that were once widely regarded as relics of more ignorant times are resurfacing to claim a place in mainstream American medicine. Acupuncture, homeopathy, traditional Chinese medicine, and massage therapy are no longer confined to the fringes of medical care but are competing with mainstream medicine for the attention of the public. One of the areas gaining considerable publicity, and at the same time generating a lot of controversy, is herbal medicine. It sometimes seems that not a day goes by without the appearance of yet another newspaper article or television news item about St. John’s wort or *Ginkgo biloba*. Once confined largely to health food stores, herbal preparations are now prominently displayed on the shelves of modern pharmacies and can be readily purchased via the Internet. They are now widely used by the general public to treat a variety of conditions, from depression to sexual dysfunction, often without the consent or knowledge of a primary physician.

I think it is correct to say that it was only in the mid-1990s that physicians in the United States began to appreciate just how popular herbal products had become. In my current position as a health sciences librarian at University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), my duties

include guiding health care practitioners to the most reliable drug information resources. A health science library fields a large number of drug-related questions from both professionals and the public, and the standard pharmaceutical literature is vast and complex. Fortunately, a large body of up-to-date and reliable information resources is available, and an experienced user can readily access accurate information on prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

When I first assumed my position at the UCSF health sciences library almost ten years ago, I knew that *Martindale: The Extra Pharmacopeia* had some basic information on herbs, and I usually referred patrons to this reference text.¹ I also remember that on one or two occasions, out of desperation, I sent someone to the history of medicine collection to consult early twentieth-century publications, such as *The Dispensatory of the United States of America*.² However, such questions were few and far between. Then, around 1997 to 1998, I began to notice a significant increase in the number and range of these questions. Interestingly, more and more of these queries were coming from nurses and physicians. The standard U.S. drug reference literature was often woefully inadequate, though I thankfully discovered Varro Tyler's two wonderful books, *The Honest Herbal* and its companion volume, *Herbs of Choice*.^{3,4} The past few years have witnessed a remarkable increase in the number and quality of herbal resources available, not least of which is the publication of an English-language translation of Germany's seminal Commission E monographs.⁵ However, locating reliable information about herbs can still pose something of a challenge for both the librarian and the health care provider.

Many health care workers are justifiably concerned that the whole area of alternative medicine is replete with unreliable, exaggerated, or misleading information. Unfortunately, mainstream health care providers still consider only a few resources authoritative, so health sciences librarians have a major problem trying to build a core collection in herbal medicine. The 1999 Brandon-Hill list of core medical journals and textbooks for the small medical library, generally acknowledged to be a good source for the most current and authoritative medical texts, lists only three textbooks and one key journal for the entire alternative medicine area.⁶ Much of the information for alternative medicine is still to be found in the so-called "gray literature," such as trade journals, pamphlets, conference proceedings, and market research reports; thus, it is often difficult to identify and obtain.⁷

Many people are now seeking health information on the Internet. Information that used to be available only in research journals or in the collection of a local medical library is now being published on Web sites that can be accessed by anyone with a home computer and an Internet Service Provider (ISP). Though much of this health-related information is being provided by credentialed health professionals and organizations, many Web sites are simply glorified advertisements or are run by nonprofessionals with questionable or no qualifications. Type in a search term such as *herb* or *herbal* in any Internet search engine and you retrieve thousands of “hits,” most of them for commercial sites selling herbal products. Physicians, nurses, and pharmacists are justifiably concerned about the potentially harmful effects resulting from consumers and health professionals using this information inappropriately.

Beginning in 1998, in response to requests for herbal information from faculty and students here at UCSF, I began to examine how herbal information is presented on the Internet, compiling a list of those World Wide Web sites which I considered to be the most valuable. This formed the basis for a short paper I wrote for a library journal, listing and describing these sites.⁸ One impetus for compiling such a list was the apparent paucity of such guides in the literature, and my belief that the few published sources, even those which had begun to appear in mainstream medical journals, were far from complete and usually overlooked some of the better sites. Since 1998, my initial list of Web sites has grown considerably longer, and major developments in the United States and in Europe have significantly influenced the availability of online information about herbs.

When I first began looking at herbal resources, most of my attention was focused on finding information for those herbs most widely used in the United States and Europe, such as St. John’s wort, echinacea, and valerian (see Table 1), and during the writing of this book, I maintained that initial focus. However, many mainstream physicians are investigating herbs used in Chinese medicine or in other traditional healing systems that are, as yet, not very widely known in North America. So, as the book grew, along with the number of Web sites, I found myself seeking information on more esoteric herbs, such as devil’s claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*) from Africa or cat’s claw (*Uncaria tomentosa*) from Peru.

TABLE 1. Top Ten Best-Selling Herbs in the United States in 1998-1999¹

1. Ginkgo (<i>Ginkgo biloba</i>)
2. St. John's wort (<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>)
3. Ginseng (<i>Panax ginseng</i> , <i>P. quinquefolius</i> , <i>Eleutherococcus senticosus</i>)
4. Garlic (<i>Allium sativum</i>)
5. Echinacea (<i>Echinacea</i> spp.)/Goldenseal (<i>Hydrastic canadensis</i>) ²
6. Saw Palmetto (<i>Serenoa repens</i>)
7. Kava-Kava (<i>Piper methysticum</i>)
8. Pycnogenol ³ /Grape Seed
9. Cranberry (<i>Vaccinium macrocarpum</i>)
10. Valerian (<i>Valeriana officinalis</i>)

Source: Blumenthal, M. Market Report. *HerbalGram*, Number 47, pp. 64-65, 1999.

¹Ranked by sales.

²These two herbs are commonly combined with each other.

³This is a patented extract derived from the bark of pine trees.

This book is intended to serve as more than just an annotated bibliography of herbal Internet sites. My hope is that this book will be a guide to using the Internet for research into all aspects of herbal medicine. For convenience, included Web sites are grouped into chapters based on the primary type of information to be found on them, such as regulations and standards, or side effects, adverse reactions, and drug interactions. Each chapter begins with introductory information that hopefully places the Web sites in context, providing the reader with some background knowledge necessary for a better understanding of the current political and social issues surrounding herbal medicine in North America and Europe.

In general, I have not thought it necessary to include detailed directions for navigating many of these Web sites, nor for locating specific posted resources. The design and organization of Web sites, as well as their corresponding navigational tools, have undergone considerable advances since the early days of the World Wide Web. After all, extensive collections of resources on particular subjects are not much use if they are hard to locate or navigate. Many sites now include a Web site map, which is a visual listing or representation of its contents. Others provide an integrated search engine to help users access

information: just typing in one or more terms is usually sufficient to find relevant documents.

This book is divided into sixteen chapters, dealing with different aspects of herbal medicine such as botanical information, historical research, clinical evidence for efficacy, adverse reactions, regulatory issues, and consumer information. Each chapter begins with a short introductory section, followed by an alphabetical listing of selected Web sites or resources providing access to information in this area, along with the URL, description, and guide to the type of information to be found. Obviously, some sites provide information in several areas so they may be listed in more than one chapter. Since many health professionals are now concerned about the reliability of health information found on the Internet, the opening chapter addresses this issue. A glossary of terms commonly encountered in the current herbal literature is also included. While on the subject of terminology, you will notice that I frequently use the term Complementary and Alternative Medicine, or CAM, when referring to the whole area of “alternative medicine.” The reason for this is explained in Chapter 14.

Please note that any information you find on these Web sites is not meant to substitute for the advice provided by a physician or other health care professional. Nor are there any intentional endorsements of any particular product, or treatment recommendations of particular diseases or health-related conditions.

David Owen

Chapter 1

Herbal Medicine and the Internet

Be careful of reading health books. You may die of a misprint.

Mark Twain

HERBAL INFORMATION RESOURCES

In the preface to the 1981 edition of the *The Honest Herbal*, Dr. Varro Tyler, a respected authority on herbal medicines, opined:

More misinformation regarding the efficacy of herbs is currently being placed before consumers than at any previous time, including the turn-of-the-century heyday of patent medicines.¹

In the years since this was written, major developments, both in the United States and in European countries, have considerably improved the amount of reliable information on herbs that is now available to both the general public and health care providers. However, although both the number and quality of information resources have improved, the increased consumer demand for herbal preparations has resulted in a proliferation of both print and online publications that are of variable quality and reliability. The newcomer to herbal medicine often has to navigate through a maze of unsubstantiated claims and anecdotal information, a large percentage of it written by nonprofessionals or herbal product manufacturers. Difficulties associated with finding substantiated data are often compounded by what seems to be the strong mystical or New Age slant of much herbal writing—something that you will not find in *The Physicians' Desk Reference* (PDR). In addition, and perhaps most important, to those

trained in the methodology of scientific medicine, traditional herbal literature seems to be antiscientific, as well as antagonistic to mainstream medicine and its public health watchdogs, such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

HERBAL INFORMATION AND THE INTERNET

Problems associated with locating reliable herbal information have been exacerbated by the arrival of the Internet and the associated proliferation of health-related Web sites. Personal computers are now ubiquitous, as well as easy to use, and sophisticated health care consumers are beginning to use the Internet to educate themselves about their own health. A vast amount of health care data is available on the Internet. The current estimate is that over 10,000 sites now provide some type of health information.² According to a report published by the Pew Research Center in November 2000, 52 million American adults have now used the Web to get health or medical information, and 47 percent of those who sought health information for themselves say the material affected their decisions about treatments and care.³

Many health professionals and organizations are justifiably concerned about the quality of this Web-based health information because of the extreme variability in its quality and the effect of commercial interests on its content.⁴ It is technically very easy to publish on the Web and can be done by practically anyone with a computer, inexpensive software, and access to the Internet. Unlike such documents as peer-reviewed journal articles, Web-based information resources face little regulation or standardization: their quality is often determined solely by the organizations and individuals who publish them. This is of particular concern because misinformation or the incorrect use of medical information can be harmful. As the public interest in herbs grows, so does the number of Web sites, with a large amount of unsubstantiated reports and misinformation. Many unique Web-based sources are posted by individuals or organizations that operate outside mainstream medicine. A 1997 study of Internet herbal information by students at Albany College of Pharmacy compared claims made about eleven popular herbal products with data from peer-reviewed journals: they concluded that only 45 percent of associated claims were true, 6 percent were false, and 2 percent were meaningless.⁴