

Book Reviews

The Australian Medicines Handbook

Chairman editorial advisory board Prof Felix Bochner
Published by Australian Medicines Handbook Pty Ltd
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REVIEWED BY RICHARD DUNCAN, B PHARM*

This is the first edition of an Australian national formulary. A new edition is planned for each year. The philosophy of the Australian Medicines handbook (AMH), detailed in the Foreword, is to use the best available evidence to support prescribing and dispensing recommendations, and to actively discourage the use of drugs where the evidence for their efficacy is lacking or poor. Undoubtedly the first edition achieves this aim. The AMH has two functions (1) to provide a readily accessible, concise, current source of independent drug information to facilitate effective, rational, safe and economic prescribing and dispensing, and (2) to provide an educational tool for students. The handbook is intended for use in different ways. A student may wish to read a whole chapter or section on a class of drugs, while a prescriber can select specific information on the dosage or adverse effects of a particular drug.

Short 'Treatment considerations' are included for some common diseases where drugs form an important part of management. The information is brief advice about potential treatments that may be considered, what evidence exists for efficacy and any consensus of expert opinion about the most appropriate treatment.

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'Class statements' provide information common to each member of a class eg opioid analgesics and also provide comparative information about individual drugs within the class. 'Drug monographs', which are listed using generic names, provide specific information on individual drugs, e.g. dosage or specific adverse effects.

The book is attractively presented, using colour to distinguish 'treatment considerations' and 'class statements' from 'drug monographs'. The binding and cover do not look particularly substantial, but it is only intended to be used for 12 months. It is more expensive than the British National Formulary, but is easier to use.

Funding for publication of the first edition has been made available from a Commonwealth Department of Health grant to The Australasian Society of Clinical and Experimental Pharmacologists and Toxicologists, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. Following publication of the first edition, the AMH will be self funding from sales of the book.

There is some general information on prescribing for specific groups of patients ie children, elderly, pregnant or lactating women and those with renal impairment. The main information includes marketed and clinically accepted indications, contraindications, specific situations, drug interactions, clinically significant adverse effects, dosage and comparative information. The use of class statements enables common information about a drug group to be given in a concise manner rather than being repeated under each monograph. There are also some useful appendices including reference ranges for laboratory indices and plasma lipids and advisory labels for dispensed medicines.

Where does the AMH differ from information such as MIMS or PDR, produced by pharmaceutical companies? The pharmaceutical companies are promoting their own particular product and will be reluctant to draw attention to unfavourable comparisons with other products. The AMH is independently funded and can maintain a scientific impartiality. It can make comparisons between drugs and discourage use of drugs if valid trials have shown lack of efficacy, adverse effects are sufficient to discourage use, or a cheaper product is as efficacious. Drug company literature must conform to guidelines laid down by regulatory bodies for the country's health administration body and so it is often not of practical use to the prescriber. The information in the AMH is relevant to clinical use

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Areas of particular interest to Pacific countries include antimicrobials, respiratory drugs, antihypertensives, antidiabetic drugs and dermatology and are comprehensively dealt with. There are also treatment protocols for tuberculosis, Hansen's disease and common worm infections. The section on antimicrobials includes interesting tables on susceptibility of micro-organisms and also pattern of resistance. This data, of course, applies to Australian conditions and must be interpreted with caution for other geographical areas.

The editorial staff are all practitioners from various sections of medicine. Each chapter has been extensively reviewed by leading experts in that particular field. Where there is no consensus of opinion the Handbook will say so, e.g. on the benefits of hormone replacement therapy.

The book is easy to use although students or others less pharmacologically orientated may miss some information which is placed under a 'class statement' rather than under a particular drug monograph. On the other hand, grouping information saves unnecessary repetition. There is some inconsistency in information on drug interactions, e.g. disopyramide-rifampicin interaction is listed under disopyramide but not under rifampicin. Drug interactions may be more conveniently listed together in an appendix

A number of tables have been spread across two pages which gives them a somewhat clumsy appearance. The

practice points are of variable significance, as some monographs have a lot of useful information and others scant material, or it is under the class information. Some important areas have not been included in the first edition, e.g. anti-cancer drugs, fluids and electrolytes and emergency drugs.

The information on psychotropic drugs is not very comprehensive. Perhaps these omissions are to tempt us to buy the second edition? However, in general information is easy to find.

Practitioners are often presented with too much information rather than too little. The AMH may overcome the information overload by providing concise summaries on drugs.

While it has been compiled in Australia, the information included, apart from the Pharmaceutical Benefits data, is equally valid for clinical practice or for students in all regions where western medicine is practised. Like the British National Formulary, I feel that the AMH will become a valuable tool for health professionals in a number of countries. Where there are multiple users in an area such as a hospital or library, the CD-Rom version may be useful for a computer network.

Copies of the book or CD-Rom may be obtained from: Australian Medicines Handbook, P.O. Box 240 Rundle Mall, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia.
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I pa'a ke kino o ke keiki i ka lā'au.

**That the body of the child be solidly
built by the medicines.**

A mother ate herbs during the pregnancy and nursing
for the sake of the baby's health. *Ōlelo No'eau #1252*