

Finding the right information at the right time

Part 1: Drugs, reference books, clinical practice guidelines

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Keeping up-to-date and finding valid, relevant medical information quickly are daily concerns for family doctors. Often, at the end of the workday, questions remain unanswered due to time constraints and lack of adequate resources. Reference books and guides are often out of date or do not answer specific questions. You are unable to get in touch with an expert to discuss treatment. A new medication cannot be found in the *Compendium of Pharmaceuticals and Specialities (CPS)*. Often, you do not have the time or the tools to search through the medical literature or to appraise it. So how do you go about obtaining good medical information efficiently?

This first of two articles briefly describes some electronic resources for medications, reference books, and clinical practice guidelines in terms of their practical uses. The websites we suggest have not been researched systematically, nor have they been formally evaluated by validated grids, but we have examined them closely for their relevance and validity.

Drugs

For many new drugs on the market, little information exists in the literature and no product monograph has yet appeared in the CPS. Up-to-date databases on prescription drugs, such as "Clinical Pharmacology Online," "RxList," and the United States Food and Drug Administration's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research (**Table 1**), are useful resources in this context. For most drugs, these free sites provide indications, dosages, drug interactions, and the main findings of the original studies. All of these sites are, however, American.

Most physicians are familiar with *The Medical Letter*, which is now available on disk and on the Internet. This site offers unbiased evaluations of new drugs, suggests alternative therapeutic approaches, and makes it possible to analyze drug interactions from a list of medications. Physicians have to subscribe to this website to gain access. If you are looking for a more systematic and rigorous evaluation of the efficacy and clinical applications of certain new drugs or classes of drugs, try the University of British Columbia's website, "Therapeutics Letter."

If you are looking for a practical Canadian guide to ambulatory problems, "Drugs of Choice" is an excellent resource available on disk. As its name suggests, it recommends first- and second-line choices based on hard evidence. The latest edition of this guide produced by the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) unfortunately dates back to 1998.

For safe, vigilant prescribing, *MedWatch* and *Canadian Adverse Drug Reaction Newsletter* actively monitor drugs after they have been brought to market, reporting on side effects, indicating changes in monographs, and noting drugs taken off the market. The Canadian software program *Vigilance clinique* (vigilance.sante@videotron.ca) has drug sheets in French and a very practical program for checking drug interactions (available on CD-ROM only).

Reference books

A few reference books have electronic versions that are available free (**Table 1**). The "eMedicine.com" website has a good-quality book on emergency medicine that is updated regularly. Several other electronic references on a variety of subjects are being developed.

Physicians can create their own electronic libraries by subscribing to a commercial website such as "MD Consult" or "Books@Ovid." "MD Consult" provides access to about 40 common reference books spanning the different disciplines of medicine (**Table 1**). This website has a powerful search engine and searches are done by key word or table of contents. A 10-day trial offer is available (and now website access is free with CME subscriptions).

You might prefer to buy a CD-ROM, such as "TETON Statref," that provides access to about 30 reference books, including the "Lange" series, in various medical and surgical disciplines (cost is proportional to number of books). A single CD can contain tens of thousands of pages of information that can be rapidly consulted because Internet access is unnecessary.

Electronic versions of reference books can be updated frequently and often have links to recent literature. Excellent examples include "Scientific American Medicine" and *Harrison's Principles of Medicine*, available on CD-ROM or on-line (**Table 1**). "Clinical Evidence" provides the best evidence available in the literature regarding treatment of some common clinical problems.

Two excellent reference books actively monitor the literature and provide a critical synthesis of information: "UpToDate" (internal medicine) and "Dynamed" (family medicine).

Clinical practice guidelines

The CMA's website features the "CMA Infobase," which lists clinical practice guidelines produced in Canada by medical or health organizations (**Table 1**). We should also mention the Canadian Task Force on Preventive Health Care (CTFPHC) and the practice guidelines published by

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the Quebec College of Physicians that are available online. The CMA also has links to other databases listing practice guidelines for various countries (Germany, New Zealand, Scotland, United States), notably the "National Guideline Clearinghouse" website, where browsers can see how different clinical practice guidelines compare.

Our second article will discuss electronic resources in the following areas: MEDLINE and systematic reviews, medical journals, new developments in medicine, sites of special interest, search engines, and meta-search engines.

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Table 1. Electronic library for clinicians

RESOURCE	INTERNET ADDRESS	COUNTRY	FRENCH	ENGLISH	COST
DRUG INFORMATION DATABASES					
Drugs of Choice 1998	http://www.cma.ca/catalog/252.htm	Canada	No	Yes	Yes
Therapeutics Letter	http://www.ti.ubc.ca/pages/letter.html	Canada	No	Yes	No
<i>Canadian Adverse Drug Reaction Newsletter</i> (Health Canada)	http://hc-sc.gc.ca/hpb-dgps/therapeut/htmlfrn/publicat.html	Canada	Yes	Yes	No
Clinical Pharmacology Online 2000	http://cp.gsm.com/fromcpo.asp	United States	No	Yes	No
RxList	http://www.rxlist.com/	United States	No	Yes	No
<i>The Medical Letter</i>	http://www.medletter.com/United States	No	Yes	Yes	
<i>MedWatch</i>	http://www.fda.gov/medwatch/safety.htm	United States	No	Yes	No
Food and Drug Administration	http://www.fda.gov/cder/	United States	No	Yes	No
FREE REFERENCE BOOKS					
<i>The Merck Manual</i> (also <i>Merck Geriatrics</i>)	http://www.merck.com/pubs/mmanual/sections.htm http://www.merck.com/pubs/mm_geriatrics/	No	Yes	No	
Dynamed (family medicine)	http://www.dynamicmedical.com/	United States	No	Yes	No
emedicine	http://www.emedicine.com/	United States	No	Yes	No
COMMERCIAL SUBSCRIPTIONS					
MD Consult	http://www.mdconsult.com/	United States	No	Yes	Yes
TETON Statref	http://www.tetondata.com/statref	United States	No	Yes	Yes
Books@Ovid	http://www.ovid.com/products/cip/books_at_ovid.cfm	United States	No	Yes	Yes
REFERENCE BOOKS WITH CHARGES					
Harrison's Online	http://www.harrisonsonline.com/	United States	No	Yes	Yes
Scientific American Medicine Online	http://www.samed.com/	United States	No	Yes	Yes
UpToDate (CD-ROM)	http://www.uptodate.com	United States	No	Yes	Yes
Clinical Evidence	http://www.clinicalevidence.org/	United Kingdom	No	Yes	Yes
PRACTICE GUIDELINES					
CMA Infobase	http://www.cma.ca/cpgs/index.asp	Canada	Yes	Yes	No
Canadian Task Force on Preventive Health Care	http://www.ctfphc.org/	Canada	Yes	Yes	No
Guides d'exercice	http://www.cmq.org/m-publi-1.htm <i>Guides d'exercice</i>	Canada	Yes	Yes	No
National Guideline Clearinghouse	http://www.guideline.gov/index.asp	United States	No	Yes	No