

Is the use of complementary and alternative medicine in the paediatric population safe? Survey results and next steps

A two-year old girl, previously well, was admitted for an appendectomy. During the routine preoperative history, the paediatrician asks the parents whether the child has been taking any medications, and he is advised that none has been given.

During the surgery, there is a problem with increased bleeding. Postoperatively, the paediatrician inquires if their daughter had taken anything, whether it be prescription or over-the-counter medications. This prompts the parents to ask whether natural health products are included, as they do not view them as medications. They stated that their daughter

had been taking a liquid extract of chamomile (4 mL, three times daily, for several weeks) to aid digestion.

In January 2006, a one-time survey was sent to 2489 CSPS participants to ascertain their experiences with complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use. Results from the survey documented that over the past year, 584 respondents (24%) reported seeing an adverse event following CAM use, and 105 identified 488 occurrences whereby patients had a delayed diagnosis or treatment. The results also indicated that only 38% of respondents routinely inquire about CAM.

LEARNING POINTS

- The National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine define CAM as "a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine".
- The World Health Organization estimates that 80% of the world population uses CAM as first-line therapy. Studies from Canada and the United States indicate CAM use in 33% to 49% of the general paediatric population (with even higher use in children with serious, chronic or recurrent illness).
- Chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*) contains coumarin, which may increase the time that blood needs to clot.
- Natural health products and spinal manipulation are popular therapies that may pose a potential safety risk for some children. Survey results documented 36 adverse events that were perceived to occur after the use of a natural health product, 14 after spinal manipulation and eight after other forms of CAM use.
- Although rare, serious adverse events are likely under-recognized and under-reported. This is further complicated by the limited data on interactions between CAM and other modes of therapy. Incidence estimates can only be calculated with better surveillance.
- Paediatricians should incorporate inquiring, in a nonjudgmental fashion, about CAM as part of their routine medical history. Families are then more likely to disclose their use, thus possibly preventing delays in diagnosis or treatment.
- For more information on CAM, please visit the following Web sites:
<http://nccam.nih.gov>
<http://www.naturaldatabase.com>

The Canadian Paediatric Surveillance Program (CSPS) is a project of the Canadian Paediatric Society that undertakes the surveillance of rare diseases and conditions in children. For more information, visit our Web site at <www.cps.ca/cfsp> or <www.cps.ca/csp>. This article has been peer-reviewed.