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**Herbal Advocate:  
An Interview with ABC's Mark Blumenthal**

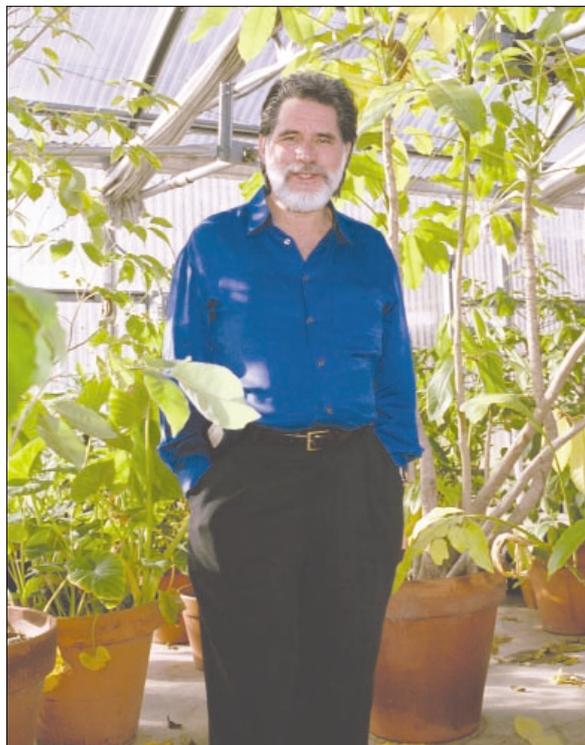
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# HERBAL ADVOCATE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ABC'S MARK BLUMENTHAL

Andrea McCloud

*Mark Blumenthal is the founder and executive director of the American Botanical Council (ABC), an independent non-profit research and education organization in Austin, Texas. He is editor and publisher of HerbalGram, ABC's quarterly journal, and editor of both the monthly electronic newsletter, HerbalEGram, and the bimonthly literature review service, HerbClip. He is also the senior editor of ABC's three books: The Complete German Commission E Monographs—Therapeutic Guide to Herbal Medicines (1998); Herbal Medicine: Expanded Commission E Monographs (2000); and The ABC Clinical Guide to Herbs (2003), and is co-author of Rational Phytotherapy: A Reference Guide for Physicians and Pharmacists, fifth edition (2005). Mr Blumenthal earned his BA in government from the University of Texas in Austin in 1968.*



**Integrative Medicine:** As executive director of a seminal organization on herbs, what do you think are the challenges in mainstreaming herbal medicine?

**Blumenthal:** Ultimately, the challenges almost always come down to information and education. There needs to be more research that is qualified by science to support the general safety and proposed benefits of herbal products. Then the challenge is how to increase public awareness of the relative value and safety of these products so they become the first line of defense and are no longer considered alternative. Another parallel challenge is the education needed for conventionally trained health professionals. They receive a limited amount of education in vital areas like nutrition. In many medical schools, herbal medicine is usually subsumed into a brief series of lectures on “alternative medicine,” or included as part of the “OTC drugs” course in some pharmacy schools.

**Integrative Medicine:** How can this challenge be met?

**Blumenthal:** More and better education—of the public, health professionals, journalists, government officials, and others. That’s the main mission of ABC: to increase the quality and quantity of educational information on the safety and benefits of herbs, phytomedicines, and other plant-based nutraceutical ingredients.

**Integrative Medicine:** What have been ABC’s biggest contributions in this regard?

**Blumenthal:** ABC’s biggest contribution has been to systematically report on important news and available scientific research in herbal medicine. *HerbalGram*, our quarterly peer-reviewed journal, was first developed as a way to communicate what’s going on in the herbal community—in the United States and around the world. Before *HerbalGram*, there was very little communication among herbal researchers, herbalists, the industry, and other stakeholders in the herbal world. There was no Internet and very few articles were being published in the mainstream press. Information on conferences, research, and regulatory issues was not getting widely disseminated.

We’ve helped elevate the status of herbs from something that was seen in the past as only folkloric. How did we do this? By showing there is an impressive and growing body of scientific data that supports much of this folkloric tradition. We were one of the first groups promoting the concept that if you have historical data showing an herb

was used for a certain purpose in various cultures, and then you get modern chemical, clinical, and pharmacological studies that show the same type of effects or activity of that herb or its extracts, there's a very strong and compelling basis for considering the use of that herb for the suggested indication in self-medication or in clinical practice.

Another contribution of ABC is our publication of *The Complete German Commission E Monographs—Therapeutic Guide to Herbal Medicines*, and the sequel, *Herbal Medicine: Expanded Commission E Monographs*. The former was the first comprehensive, cross-referenced English publication of all the monographs. It represents the evaluations of the safety and efficacy of more than 300 herbs, phytomedicines, and herb combinations as assessed by an expert panel commissioned by the German government. As such, it represented a baseline of authoritative information on herb safety and efficacy, as well as a rational process for such evaluation by a government body.

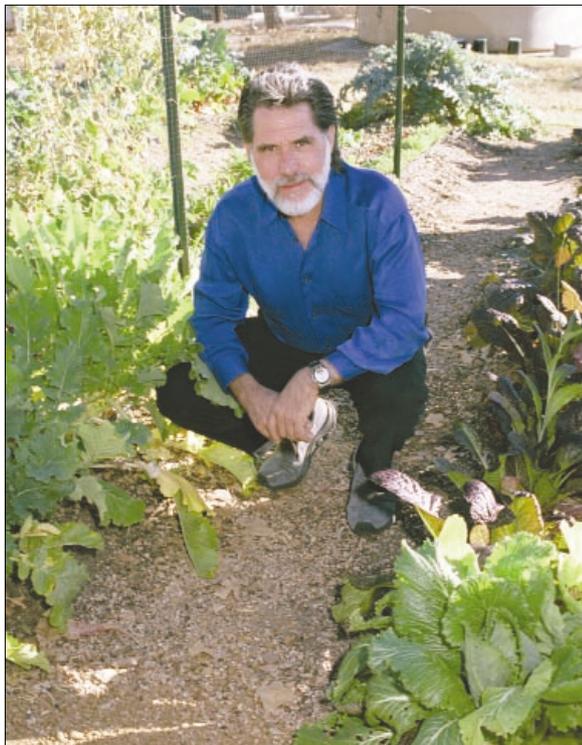
**Integrative Medicine:** To piggyback on this idea of information dissemination, can you tell me a little bit about *HerbClip*?

**Blumenthal:** Back in 1993, I had a bad habit: I would see articles in newspapers, magazines, and scientific journals, and I would clip them and send them to friends. At that time, ABC was only five years old, and money was very tight—the usual case with nonprofits. One day my accountant was going through our expenses and discovered that we were spending something like \$200 per month on copier toner. We realized that in addition to the photocopies for our in-house administrative, educational, and promotional materials, a lot of the toner was being used for the articles we were copying for my friends and colleagues. So I called Jim Beck, the founder and former owner of Solaray [currently Nutraceutical Corporation in Park City, Utah], and Ken Murdoch, who at the time was the owner of Nature's Way in Springville, Utah, and I asked them if they'd like to have a clipping service, which they could use for research, new-product development, marketing, and/or regulatory purposes. They said, "Sure," and it grew from there.

Now *HerbClip* has become this unique service from ABC. We review and summarize 24 articles and reports per month, attach the original article (if we have permission from the publisher), mail them out to ABC members, and post them to the *HerbClip* database on the ABC website. *HerbClip* is great for people who don't have time to read the entire article; they can just read the *HerbClip* summary. Now we have almost 3,000 *HerbClip* reviews in our database.

**Integrative Medicine:** In addition to those publications, what else does ABC offer to the medical community?

**Blumenthal:** At different levels of membership, people receive added benefits. The initial benefit for both consumers and healthcare professionals is *HerbalGram*. In addition, they also receive *Herbal E Gram*, our monthly electronic newsletter. At the professional and academic level, members have access to our databases, such as the *HerbClip* database, *The Complete German Commission E Monographs* database, and the *Expanded Commission E Monographs* database. They also gain access to



*HerbMedPro*, a database management device that we co-market with our friends at the Alternative Medicine Foundation, a nonprofit organization in Potomac, Md. *HerbMedPro* is an online research tool where you can search 170 different herbs and find categorized information—clinical trials, pharmacological and chemical studies, traditional use data, etc. It saves people a lot of time.

**Integrative Medicine:** Let's talk a little bit about ABC's Safety Assessment Program. How did it get started and what is it, exactly?

**Blumenthal:** We recognize that herbs are pharmacologically active and, because they are, may need to be used with caution, or not used at all, by people who have certain health conditions or who are taking certain drugs. So we started producing comprehensive safety evaluations of the 25 top-selling herbs in the US marketplace. Initially, this program started in response to a request from a company that produces dietary supplements [DS] for the mass market. They wanted to take a labeling technology

that was being used in household products and insecticides—where the label peels back and reveals a small booklet filled with information on safe use—and put that type of label on herbal supplement bottles. We entered into a nonexclusive relationship, so that other companies could have access to similar data, and we commissioned the peer-reviewed safety evaluations.

The basic and consumer-relevant information on these *Safety Assessment Reports* was then condensed and used on the new labels. The main problem with this program was that labels are relatively expensive, thereby increasing the overall cost of the product. Most companies cannot take on the extra financial burden, so now we also make this safety information available in other formats for companies to use on their websites, in their brochures and other marketing materials, for use by personnel in their customer call centers, etc.

**Integrative Medicine:** What is being done by the government and within the industry to ensure herbal products are safe and their quality is consistent?

**Blumenthal:** The Food and Drug Administration [FDA] has plenty of laws and regulations currently on the books from which it can and does regulate the herb and DS industry. That being said, one might argue that it is not uniformly and adequately administering and enforcing the existing regulations and laws. When critics say that the herb and supplement industries are not adequately regulated, they often fail to realize that the FDA itself bears a significant responsibility for this. It's been over 11 years since the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act [DSHEA] was passed, and at this time the FDA still has not published final Good Manufacturing Practice [GMP] regulations.

But there's plenty of responsibility on the part of some industry members, too. There are too many times that companies have made claims that were either outrageous and/or not able to be substantiated by the present state of available science. Fortunately, countering this, there are also numerous companies that ascribe to a high level of ethics and are relatively conservative about claims they make for their products.

How does a consumer know which brands to trust? To attempt to address this question, four third-party organizations have created programs to routinely assess the quality and consistency of DS products: ConsumerLab.com, the National Nutritional Foods Association's TruLabel and GMP programs [www.nnfa.org], NSF International [www.nsf.org], and the United States Pharmacopeia [www.usp.org]. Each of these organizations have devised a seal of approval that any qualifying and subscribing manufacturer can put onto its labels so the public knows these respective products meet some baseline of quality and reliability.

**Integrative Medicine:** Is anything being done to force the FDA to more consistently enforce regulations?

**Blumenthal:** There's pressure from various members of Congress, from both parties, for a variety of reasons: quality-control concerns, issues concerning safety (mainly associated with problems formerly surrounding the now-banned herb ephedra). ABC does not actively support or oppose legislation. We do not lobby. We do support, however, the concept of rational regulation of herbs as both DS and as drugs (as appropriate for the form and intended use). We support the responsible and rational uses of herbs, particularly when these uses are supported by good science. It is our mission to help in this direction and we feel privileged to be able to participate in this interesting and exciting area.

### Resources

- ABC, [www.herbalgram.org](http://www.herbalgram.org)
- Alternative Medicine Foundation, [www.amfoundation.org](http://www.amfoundation.org)
- National Institutes of Health, National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, <http://nccam.nih.gov/>
- National Institutes of Health, Office of Dietary Supplements, <http://ods.od.nih.gov/>
- Phytochemical and Ethnobotanical Databases by James Duke, PhD, <http://www.ars-grin.gov/duke/index.html>

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This interview was conducted by Andrea McCloud, a freelance writer who reports regularly on health and wellness. Her book series, the *Glow Guides*, including *Meditation*, *Yoga*, and *Spa*, is published by Chronicle Books (San Francisco, Calif). Most recently, she was a contributing writer for the revised edition of *Arthritis: An Alternative Medicine Definitive Guide* (Alternativemedicine.com Books, Boulder, Colo). She is currently earning her MFA at the University of California, Los Angeles, and lives in Venice, Calif.