

## **The Nurse-Herbalist: Integrative Insights for Holistic Practice**

by Joan C. Engebretson, DrPH, AHN-BC, RN

*HerbalGram*. 2012; American Botanical Council

***The Nurse-Herbalist: Integrative Insights for Holistic Practice*** by Martha M. Libster. University Park, IL: Golden Apple Publications; 2012. Softcover, 450 pages. ISBN: 978-0-97550-184-9. \$39.95.

Martha Libster, PhD, a registered nurse who specializes in complementary healing traditions and herbal therapies, has a new book titled *The Nurse-Herbalist: Integrative Insights for Holistic Practice*. This book follows her other titles *Herbal Diplomats* (Golden Apple Publications, 2004) and *Delmar's Integrative Herb Guide for Nurses* (Cengage Learning Publications, 2001). In her latest book, Dr. Libster describes a legacy of herbal practice and presents a model for a nurse-herbalist practice. She lays a foundation that links the use of medicinal plants with the essential elements of holistic nursing care. Additionally, the author situates the integrative use of herbs both historically and theoretically in the health and healing domains of nursing. She unites her knowledge of cross-cultural herbal practices, her scientific knowledge of botany, and what she describes as “integrative insight” for a synergistic understanding of nature and the plant world.

Dr. Libster presents 3 practice models — consumer, herbalist, and integrative — to organize the various approaches to a nurse-herbalist practice. The consumer model focuses on educational resources and information. This is the most common model for nurses who are new to herbal therapies, as it generally involves using single herbs and is similar to using medications for specific conditions. The herbalist model focuses on the arts and experiences with herbs, and builds on traditional approaches to herbs found in traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, and Western herbal medicine that link herbs to nature and an understanding of the larger natural order. She describes several exercises to heighten the herbalist’s perception in the use of herbs and relates this to the nursing process.

The integrative model includes 3 views or paradigms of health and healing: biomedical, traditional, and holistic healing. She connects the integrative model to nursing and midwifery with their historic use of herbal treatments and promoting the health of the patient. The integrative model combines the biomedical and traditional models. She outlines the importance of the biomedical model and the scientific study of herbs, but cautions against the limitations of relying only on that model.

The second paradigm, the traditional and herbal perspective, includes stories of herbal remedies from various times and cultures and extends the concept to remedies that go beyond treatment of a disorder. She describes the healer’s engagement with the plants, which provides a very different perspective and changes the focus to the use and understanding of the person and the plants as opposed to the biomedical perspective of standardization and mechanisms to treat a disease or disorder. These 2 paradigms may often clash; however, the integrative paradigm is a holistic blend of the biomedical and the traditional perspectives. This paradigm is founded on discernment, pattern recognition, and self-care. Dr. Libster links this approach with some of the holistic nursing theorists and frames an integrative insight as a partnership with plants. She views plant remedies as affecting body, mind, emotion, and spirit.

Dr. Libster devotes over half of the book to describing personal insights and reflections that underlie her nurse-herbalist practice. She describes some of the historic studies and uses of plants by being observant of the presence and patterns of plants, including how and where they grow, as well as the patterns, colors, and shapes of the plants. She uses the 5 elements in nature — earth, air, water, fire, and ether — as a structure for nurses who are developing an herbal healing practice. She argues that the exercises that focus on these elements are consistent with the nursing process in developing a practice plan. The first step is labeled “Entering the Earth Element,” which relates to the physical self, and she invites the nurse to focus on the physical connection to the environment and healing plants. “Awakening to the Air Element” deals with engaging one’s intuition and mind in assessing and diagnosing health patterns, while integrating biomedical, nursing, and herbal perspectives. In “Welcoming the Water Element,” Dr.

Libster links the importance of water to health, along with the flow and understanding of emotions. This is a step in recognizing the importance of relationships in patient care. “Fanning the Fire Elements” is associated with the spiritual self as well as the transformation of healing. The final chapter, “Effecting the Ether Element,” refers to the higher self and extends the practice to the ethics of peace and planet healing.

This book is aimed at a nursing audience with the intention of integrating herbs into the well-known nursing process. Holistic nurses, in particular, should find this book useful and engaging. The addition of the many examples of experiences with herbs and vivid descriptions of the human relationship with plants make for both educational and entertaining reading. Holistic nurses will likely find this book enjoyable as well as informative. This book may have appeal beyond a nursing readership, particularly for those who are interested in herbs and the history and practice of herbal healing. It also provides a perspective of nurses and nursing of which many may not be aware.

**—Joan Engebretson, DrPH, AHN-BC, RN**

**Judy Fred Professor in Nursing**

**University of Texas Health Science Center**

**Houston, Texas**