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Review of Medline: A Guide to Effective Searching in Pubmed & Other Interfaces

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MEDLINE: A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE SEARCHING IN PUBMED & OTHER INTERFACES

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MEDLINE: A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE SEARCHING IN PUBMED & OTHER INTERFACES. Brian S.Katcher. *San Francisco, CA: Ashbury Press, 2006. ISBN 0-9673445-1-4.*

A few pages into *Medline: A Guide To Effective Searching in PubMed and Other Interfaces* by Brian S. Katcher, it became clear to me that my charge as the reviewer was not to determine the quality of the book, but to determine how this book fits into the resources that are already available about this database. The fundamental question is who is this book's reader?

The author quickly engages you with his smooth writing style and his excitement about the power and utility of this medical research tool. He explains that he began using Medline for his research in 1971 as an assistant professor at a school of pharmacy, and continues to use it 35 years later. He outlines the history of Medline, starting with 1864, when John Shaw Billing, a military surgeon was put in charge of the Surgeon General's Library. Over the years, Billing's approach to indexing medical information became increasingly sophisticated and converged with technology, eventually creating today's Medline and its best known interface, PubMed.

Katcher states that the "problem" with this database is its size; the PubMed website states MEDLINE has 15,000,000 biomedical journal citations. Happily, this size is made manageable by a rich indexing scheme. But in order to get useful results from your search you have to be able to use the indexing effectively, and the author states that this book will help you do that.

While stating that there are many interfaces for Medline, Katcher does not really address their differences, or evaluate them in any way. Since he does not do a comparison of the interfaces, there are no screen shots in this reference. Oddly, though explaining complex relationships, there are few images or visual guides of any kind in the book. The author does an excellent job of describing the generic concepts involved in searching in a database. And the most helpful parts of the book are his suggestions about searching by publication type, how to

develop limiting strategies and framing questions. Unfortunately there are a small number of these suggestions, and that is the major weakness of this book. Had he elaborated in these areas, he would have created a very valuable reference.

This is a second edition of the work; the first edition came out in 1999. This edition is not a large departure from the first. The references and the listing of related web resources are expanded from the first edition, and information has been added about new features, such as PubMed's "My NCBI" accounts, and the links to Bookshelf, the wonderful collection of online medical books.

I found a review of the first edition that concluded that there was nothing that the book provided that could not be found on the Internet, "for free" (http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3225/is_4_61/ai_59480977). Certainly PubMed's site is well designed, has excellent tutorials, and users can navigate a Medline interface without using this book. In fact, the author encourages you to use PubMed tutorials as they help with the book's "main mission, teaching you to think critically in applying Medline's power." But I think that there is information in this book that is beyond what is available about Medline on the Internet. And the author's reformatting of some the information that is available on the Internet is also helpful, and makes some key concepts clearer.

So, my answer to the question, "who is this book's reader?" The ideal reader is someone who is going use a Medline database extensively, appreciates a historical perspective, and wants to connect with all the power of this wonderful research tool.

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