“Alternate” vs. “Alternative”: Which is the correct alternative?

In biomedical writing, alternative is intended more often than alternate. Alternative is used when a choice is offered (e.g., alternative suggestions) or when something differs from conventional practice (e.g., alternative treatments), whereas alternate is used when something occurs by turns or every other time (e.g., alternating shifts) or when one thing substitutes for another (e.g., alternate reviewers). Alternative and alternate can both be used as nouns, but only alternate can be used as a verb. Both terms can serve as adjectives, and both words have adverb forms (ending in -ly).

Incorrect:
Radiation therapy is an effective alternate to surgery in some patients.

Correct:
Radiation therapy is an effective alternative to surgery in some patients.

Incorrect:
Mary was chosen as an alternative for the jury.

Correct:
Mary was chosen as an alternate for the jury.

Incorrect:
We sought an alternate explanation.

Correct:
We sought an alternative explanation.

Incorrect:
Regimens X and Y were given alternatively.

Correct:
Regimens X and Y were given alternately.

Also correct:
We alternated regimen X and regimen Y.

Bibliography