

ORIGINAL PAPER

Homeopathy in rural Australian primary health care: a survey of general practitioner referral and practice in rural and regional New South Wales, Australia

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Introduction: Homeopathy has attracted considerable recent attention from the Australian conventional medical community. However, despite such increased attention there has been little exploration of the interface between homeopathy and Australian conventional medical practice. This article addresses this research gap by exploring homeopathic practice and referral by rural and regional Australian general practitioners (GPs).

Materials and methods: A 27-item questionnaire was sent to all 1486 GPs currently practising in rural and regional New South Wales, Australia (response rate 40.7%).

Results: Few GPs in this study utilised homeopathy in their personal practice, with only 0.5% of GPs prescribing homeopathy in the past 12 months, and 8.5% referring patients for homeopathic treatment at least a few times over the past 12 months. Nearly two-thirds of GPs (63.9%) reported that they would not refer for homeopathy under any circumstances. Being in a remote location, receiving patient requests for homeopathy, observing positive responses from homeopathy previously, using complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practitioners as information sources, higher levels of knowledge of homeopathy, and being interested in increasing CAM knowledge were all independently predictive of increased referral to homeopathy amongst GPs in this study. GPs in this study were less likely to refer to homeopathy if they used peer-reviewed literature as the major source of their information on CAM.

Conclusions: Homeopathy is not integrated significantly in rural general practice either via GP utilisation or referral. There is significant opposition to homeopathy referral amongst rural and regional GPs, though some level of interaction with homeopathic providers exists. *Homeopathy* (2013) 102, 199–206.

Keywords: Homeopathy; General practice; Rural health care; Health services; Referral; Interdisciplinary care; Primary health care

Introduction

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use in Australia is rising, with visits to CAM practitioners now accounting for up to half of all health consults in Australia, as well as half of all out-of-pocket health care expenses.¹ Although CAM use in Australia remains high, homeopathy itself appears to play only a minor role. National surveys suggest that between 2.2% and 6.0% of Australians use

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homeopathic remedies, and between 1.2% and 2.9% have consulted with a homeopathic practitioner in the past 12 months.^{1–3} Much homeopathic treatment in Australia is likely to be self-prescribed use of remedies, with only 47.7% of persons using homeopathic remedies visiting with a practitioner prescribing homeopathic remedies.¹ This may be related to low homeopathic practitioner numbers in Australia, with homeopaths as a professional group account for less than 3% of 'primary health care' CAM professionals.⁴ However, despite being one of the minor CAM therapies in Australia, it has been estimated in a previous study in 2005 that there are up to 3 million practitioner visits in which homeopathy is prescribed in Australia annually.¹

The unregistered nature of the homeopathic profession in Australia makes it difficult to ascertain the number of homeopathic practitioners nationwide. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that there were 243 persons who derived their primary income from homeopathic practice in 2006.⁵ In 2012 there were over 650 registrants on the Australian Register of Homeopaths, though a significant number of registrants have dual roles in other professions (such as medical practitioners, naturopaths, veterinarians or pharmacists).⁶

However, homeopathic register numbers are likely to underestimate the number of practitioners prescribing homeopathic remedies in Australia, with data indicating significant use of homeopathic medicines by other professions in Australia such as naturopaths⁷ and midwives.⁸ A study of all homeopaths advertising their services in the Sydney region found that 58% of persons advertising themselves as homeopaths had conventional medical or allied health qualifications (predominantly medical, nursing and midwifery and psychology), with a further 21% also possessing naturopathic qualifications, with only a minority solely possessing homeopathic qualifications.⁹

General practice has been identified as one branch of medicine where CAM is making its presence felt.^{10–13} However, integration and acceptance by general practitioners (GPs) are not even across all CAM therapies, and homeopathy appears to be amongst the least supported CAM as reported by Australian GPs. A national survey of Australian GPs found that less than 1% of GPs had practised homeopathy in the previous 12 months, though 3% had received homeopathy as part of their own treatment.¹⁰ GPs in this previous study were more inclined to refer for homeopathic treatment than practice it, with 10% referring at least monthly. Another national survey in 1997 found that 20% of GPs had referred a patient for homeopathic treatment in the past 12 months.¹¹

However, referral did not necessarily imply support, as only 9% of GPs in this Australian survey reported that they would actively encourage a patient's suggestion to use homeopathic medicines. Additionally, there seems to be little support for the integration of homeopathy into Australian general practice, with only one-quarter of GPs suggesting that homeopathy should be practised by medical doctors and only one-third supporting subsidies from Medicare (the Australian public health insurer) for medi-

cally trained practitioners providing homeopathy.¹⁰ Low levels of support for homeopathic integration are coupled with prevailing perceptions amongst Australian GPs that homeopathy is ineffective, with national studies demonstrating that 50–82% of the GP population believe homeopathy is ineffective.^{10,11}

The views on homeopathy in general practice outside of Australia also show mixed results. It has been asserted that one-in-eight GPs in New Zealand use or refer to homeopathy in practice,¹⁴ and studies of patients attending conventional general health services indicate homeopathic utilisation of 27–65%.^{15,16} British studies suggest that 49% of Scottish GP practices and 21% of English GP practices have prescribed homeopathic remedies.^{17,18} However, higher homeopathic use in these countries has led to high-profile calls for medical practitioners to cease supporting, practising or referring to homeopathy – calls promoted by medical associations and printed in the major medical journals.^{19–22}

The heterogeneity of GP views on homeopathy is further complicated by debate amongst GPs who doubt the scientific validity of homeopathy, yet may still acknowledge homeopathy as a potentially therapeutically effective treatment due to its enhanced non-specific, or placebo, effects.²³ Such perceptions are fed by emerging evidence that the empathic consultation received in a homeopathic consultation itself facilitates clinical improvement,²⁴ as well as evidence from observational studies demonstrating consistent clinical improvement in patients who receive homeopathic treatment.^{25–27} However, even the use of homeopathy in the context of placebo therapy by GPs draws controversy and generates heterogeneous views, with some elements of the GP community supporting its use as a therapeutically useful treatment, particularly for medically unexplained symptoms,²⁸ while others decry the use of any placebo-based treatment, including homeopathy, as unethical.²⁹

The controversial nature of homeopathy in biomedicine extends to the therapy's use in Australia. Despite the relatively minor role of homeopathy in the Australian health care sector, the discipline has nevertheless attracted significant controversy. Recent instances of negative outcomes, including death, from patients receiving homeopathy in lieu of conventional medical care have received widespread national attention.³⁰ Building on these developments, the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC) has recently announced a review of homeopathy, overseen by a Homeopathic Working Committee, which will develop an information paper on homeopathy and a draft position statement for consideration by the NHMRC Council.³¹ That this will be adapted to an Australian context from the UK House of Commons Science and Technology Committee report on homeopathy, which advocated that the British government should refrain from funding homeopathic treatments, or further research into homeopathy.^{32,33}

The draft NHMRC position on homeopathy, released in 2011 for consultation purposes, posited that homeopathy was ineffective, and consequently it would be unethical

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