



Naturopaths and Western herbalists' attitudes to evidence, regulation, information sources and knowledge about popular complementary medicines[☆]

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Registration

Summary

Background: The practice of naturopathy and Western herbal medicine (WHM) was built on traditional evidence but may be undergoing change with the advent of scientific evidence. The aims of this research were to provide a better understanding of practitioners' attitudes towards evidence, information sources, professional regulation and their knowledge about the evidence of commonly used complementary medicines (CMs).

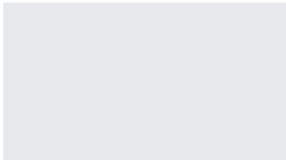
Method: Naturopaths and WHM practitioners were invited to participate in an anonymous, self-administered, on-line survey. Participants were recruited using the mailing lists and websites of CM manufacturers and professional associations.

Results: Four hundred and seventy nine practitioners participated; 95% currently in practice. The majority (99%) thought well documented traditional evidence was essential or important, 97% patient reports and feedback, 97% personal experience, 94% controlled randomised trials and 89% published case reports. Significantly more recent graduates (less than 5 years)

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rated randomised trials as essential compared to others. Most (82%) respondents want information sources containing both traditional and scientific evidence. They currently use several resources; 74% CM textbooks, 67% conferences/seminars, 57% CM journals, 48% databases and 40% manufacturers' information. The mean knowledge score was 61.5% with no significant differences between respondents with diploma or degree level education or by graduating year. Eighty-five percent of practitioners strongly agreed or agreed that practitioners should be formally registered to safeguard the public, 8% were unsure and 8% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Conclusion: Naturopaths and WHM practitioners accept the importance of scientific evidence whilst maintaining the importance and use of traditional evidence. The majority are in favour of professional registration.

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Introduction

Complementary and alternative medicine is a broad term used to describe a variety of therapies and medicines (NCCAM). Many Australians use complementary medicine (CM) therapies and products. One national survey estimated the annual out of pocket expenditure on CM as AU\$4.13 billion (US \$3.12 billion).¹ In Australia naturopathy and Western herbal medicine (WHM) is well established. A 2004 study estimated that approximately 1.9 million naturopathic and Western herbal medicine consultations are being conducted annually, generating an estimated turnover of AU\$85 million in consultations (excluding the cost of the medicines).² These figures are a reflection of the substantial public interest in naturopathy and WHM.

Naturopaths and Western herbalists practice as primary health care providers and attend to the health care needs of people with a variety of conditions, usually within a private clinic setting.² The practice of both naturopathy and WHM focuses on patient education and personal responsibility, disease prevention and health promotion, and is underpinned by the philosophies of holistic healthcare and vitalism which recognises the body's innate healing capacity.^{3,4}

The modernisation of these professions has seen government accredited education providers include science-based subjects into their curricula such as physiology, chemistry, biochemistry and pharmacology, in addition to specific subjects about naturopathy and WHM.⁵ The changing attitudes of the profession to include more scientific evidence is reflected in the content of popular herbal and complementary medicines texts and the Australian Journal of Medical Herbalism, the official journal of the National Herbalists Association of Australia.⁶ Despite these external changes, little is known about naturopaths and WHM practitioners' attitudes to evidence in practice, how they view scientific evidence, whether having access to scientific evidence is important and their attitudes to traditional information in the light of the burgeoning scientific evidence base.

Currently the naturopathic and WHM professions are not subject to formal government regulation. Professional associations provide a form of self regulation by requiring members to have achieved minimum qualification levels, usually advanced diploma, undertake continuing professional education and adhere to a code of ethics.⁵ Some natural therapy associations favour statutory registration and more rigorous educational requirements for

practitioners,⁷ but little is known about the opinions of practitioners themselves.

Some information exists in the literature about the attitudes, information seeking behaviours and knowledge of Australian pharmacists, pharmacy students and general practitioners, as well as CM consumers, about complementary medicines.^{8–14} Similar information is lacking about Australian naturopaths and Western herbalists even though their everyday practice involves providing patients with information about complementary medicines¹⁵ and the prescribing and dispensing of such treatments when indicated.

Aims

The primary aims of this research were to provide a better understanding of naturopaths' and Western herbalists' attitudes towards evidence, information sources and knowledge about commonly used complementary medicines. A secondary aim was to determine the attitude of naturopaths and Western herbalists to formal registration of their professions.

Methodology

An anonymous, self-administered, web-based questionnaire was developed to meet the aims of the study. It was made available on a dedicated website which provided project information and a link to the survey questionnaire.

Whilst random sampling would have been the preferred option for obtaining data, this was not possible as there is currently no national register of naturopaths or WHM practitioners in Australia. Therefore a convenience sampling approach had to be undertaken. To encourage naturopaths and Western herbalists to participate, professional associations and specialist complementary medicine product distributors were contacted and asked to circulate project information and an invitation to participate to their association members or relevant practitioner customers.

Data collection took place over 5 weeks between March and April 2009. Data were manually entered by participants into SurveyMonkey™, an on-line survey tool. Consent was implied by agreement to complete the survey questionnaire. Ethics approval was obtained from the Alfred and Monash Human Research Ethics Committees, and subsequently from

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