

ORIGINAL PAPER

The characteristics, experiences and perceptions of homeopaths in New Zealand: results from a national survey of practitioners

Phillip Cottingham^{1,*}, Jon Adams², Ram Vempati¹, Jill Dunn¹ and David Sibbritt²

¹Wellpark College of Natural Therapies, New Zealand

²Australian Research Centre in Complementary and Integrative Medicine (ARCCIM), University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Background: The popularity of homeopathy is seemingly at odds with the scientific controversy over its effectiveness. Several studies have reported on effectiveness of clinical homeopathy, but few studies have been conducted on practices and perceptions of homeopaths, and none in New Zealand (NZ). To address this gap, this paper reports findings from the first national survey examining the characteristics, perceptions and experiences of NZ-based homeopaths regarding a wide range of issues relating to their role and practice. There were 176 homeopaths in NZ at the time of this survey, who were members of a voluntary register (The New Zealand Council of Homeopaths), homeopaths are not statutorily registered in NZ.

Methods: A 65 question, online survey was sent to homeopathic practitioners via their professional associations. A total of 176 homeopaths were invited to participate. Of these 176, 57 (32%) responded.

Results: The majority of homeopaths were female (93%). Twelve percent were under 45 years and 20% over 55 years. Most (85%) had qualification in homeopathy of diploma or certificate level and most (66%) were engaged in part-time practice. Mean year of experience was 12.6 and mean caseload per month was 25. That 90% considered research useful to validate practice, 88% considered that it impacted on practice, although only 48% had skills to interpret research papers. There was an association between skills to interpret research and its impact on practice ($p = 0.038$). The majority (87%) were in favour of registration, with a statistically significant association between attitudes to registration and age ($p = 0.027$), the older homeopaths being more in favour. Most (68%) were in favour of integration with conventional practitioners and many referred to conventional practitioners (mean referrals per annum to GPs = 57 and midwives = 30). Homeopaths assessed their contribution to New Zealand Ministry of Health objectives as significant, with 77% perceiving that they improved nutrition, 75% increasing physical activity and 63% reducing smoking.

Conclusion: These findings enable greater understanding of the way in which homeopaths practice in New Zealand and how they perceive their role in health care. These

*Correspondence: Phillip Cottingham, PO Box 78-229, Grey Lynn, Auckland 1245, New Zealand.

E-mail: principal1@wellpark.co.nz, jon.adams@uts.edu, rpvempati@gmail.com, academicleader@wellpark.co.nz, david.sibbritt@uts.edu

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findings potentially assist communication between homeopaths and other health professionals. There is a need to further investigate homeopaths' practices and perceptions in NZ. *Homeopathy* (2017) ■, 1–7.

Keywords: Homeopaths; National survey; New Zealand; Practice characteristics; Integrative practice; Referrals; Registration

Introduction: homeopathy in New Zealand

Despite intense ongoing debate about its efficacy and legitimacy for practice,¹ the popularity of homeopathy amongst patients in New Zealand (NZ)^{2,3} highlights the importance of empirically investigating these practitioners and their role within the wider health system.⁴

In the 2006 NZ census, 102 people identified their occupation as a homeopath.⁵ In the 2013 census this figure reduced to 78, representing only 2% of all complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practitioners in NZ.⁶ The New Zealand Health Survey 2006/2007⁷ reports that one in five people consulted a homeopath or naturopath in the previous twelve months. Data from general practice patients reveal that homeopathy is both popular and, in the view of patients, effective.² A survey on CAM use in a regional NZ cancer centre (n = 97) reports 9% patients utilising homeopathy.⁸

Practices and perceptions of homeopaths internationally

In Australia there is a homeopathy registration board, with no statutory status, which is independent of homeopathic associations and administers federal government competency standards.⁹ The Australian 2006 census showed that 8.4% of CAM practitioners identified themselves as homeopaths (total CAM practitioners = 19,401).¹⁰ In 2007, 6% of the Australian population used homeopathic medicine, and, of those, 48% consulted with a homeopath.¹¹ A systematic review of 20 surveys internationally (12 countries) has identified that 1.5% of populations in those countries utilise homeopathy.¹² In several countries in Europe¹² and in South Africa,¹³ Canada (Ontario),¹⁴ Ghana, Mauritius, Swaziland, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka homeopathy has statutory registration. To date, there has been little published data on the characteristics of homeopaths internationally and none in NZ. To help address this gap, this paper provides the first examination of the characteristics, practices and perceptions of homeopaths in NZ.

Method

CAM practitioners were invited to complete a 65 question, nationwide, on-line questionnaire examining aspects of practice. The questionnaire was developed specifically for this purpose and tested for consistency and clarity

with 10 practitioners. This paper reports on findings for homeopathic practice only.

Ethics approval was granted by the Ministry of Health (MoH) National Ethics Advisory Northern A committee and, for study purposes in Australia, the Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Technology Sydney, Australia.

National sample of CAM practitioners

Our survey employed a convenience sampling method to recruit participants, using the two main registering bodies for CAM practitioners in NZ. Similar sampling methods have been utilised in other surveys of CAM practitioners internationally.^{15–17} The questionnaire was distributed to 1067 CAM practitioners, of which 100 were homeopaths. Affiliated organisations were allotted a specific range of codes to distribute to members (avoiding duplicate responses and ensuring anonymity) and invited to advise members to participate. Homeopaths were recruited through the NZ Council of Homeopaths, a body affiliated to the NZ Natural Health Council.

Survey measures

Age, gender, ethnicity and practice location were included in the demographic data. Average caseloads, professional experience years, highest level of qualification and attitudes to research formed the basis of exploring practitioner characteristics. Integrative medicine and practices were surveyed through questions on attitudes to integration, referral statistics (to and from conventional practices to homeopaths) and methods of referral. Questions on attitudes towards registration (statutory and voluntary) and funding for practice (both Government subsidies and medical insurance) were included.

Analysis

The data were initially imported into STATA[®] software and descriptive analyses conducted using means and standard deviations or frequencies and percentages where applicable. A rank-sum test was used to test association between categorical and binary variables and a chi-square test or Fisher's exact test was used to test the association between two categorical variables, where appropriate. A p-value of <0.05 was set to indicate statistical significance.

Results

Of the 176 homeopaths invited, 57 responded (a 32% response rate). The overall response rate for the survey (for respondents over all modalities) was 31%. The

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