

The drive for legitimation in Australian naturopathy: Successes and dilemmas

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Abstract

Whereas naturopathic physicians have either “licensure” or state-mandated “registration” in 13 US states and four Canadian provinces, naturopaths in Australia have thus far failed to obtain “statutory registration” in any political jurisdiction, despite the fact that chiropractors and osteopaths have done so in all Australian states and territories, and acupuncturists and Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners have done so in the state of Victoria. Ironically, naturopathy and various other complementary medical systems are taught in many public tertiary institutions. This essay presents an overview of the development and the current socio-political status of naturopathy in Australia and its redefinition in some contexts as “natural therapies” and “natural medicine” or even as the major component of complementary medicine. It also examines reasons why the Australian state has come to express an interest in naturopathy along with other complementary medical systems.

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Introduction

Whereas various professionalized heterodox medical systems, such as osteopathy, chiropractic, and acupuncture, have been the focus of a modest amount of historical and social scientific research in various Anglophone countries, particularly the United States, Canada, Britain, and Australia, naturopathy as a professionalized heterodox medical system has received relatively little attention in these settings. I, along with Cody (1999) and Whorton (1986, 2002), have given some attention to the historical development and socio-political status of naturopathy in the United States and

Eliane Gort and David Coburn (1988) and Heather Boon (1997, 1998) have touched upon various aspects of naturopathy in Canada (See Baer, 1992, 2001). In comparison to North America, naturopathy in Australia has been the subject of very little historical and social scientific research. Based upon both archival and ethnographic research that I conducted during my stint as a visiting senior lecturer at Australian National University in 2004, I present an overview of the development and current socio-political status of naturopathy “down under” and its redefinition in some contexts as “natural therapies” or “natural medicine” as a broad category within the larger rubric of “complementary medicine.”

In comparison to the United States where naturopathic physicians have achieved “licensure”

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or state-mandated “registration” in 13 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, and in Canada where they have achieved “licensure” in four provinces, naturopaths have failed to achieve “statutory registration,” the rough counter-part to the former legal processes, in any Australian political jurisdiction. In contrast, chiropractors and osteopaths obtained “statutory registration” in all Australian states and territories beginning in the early 1980s and acupuncturists and Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners obtained statutory registration in the state of Victoria in 2000.

This essay also examines reasons why the Australian state has come to express an interest in and has provided limited support for naturopathy and various other complementary medical systems. For example, naturopathy and some other complementary medicine systems are now taught in various public tertiary institutions. While naturopathy in Australia has enjoyed some degree of increasing legitimation, it also faces the danger of losing its distinctive identity and becoming conflated with broader entities referred to as “natural therapies,” “natural medicine,” or even “complementary medicine.”

The regulatory process in Australia

Health policymakers in Australia have tended to delineate three forms of regulation for health occupations in Australia, namely self-regulation, statutory registration, and co-regulation (NSW Health Department, 2002, pp. 16–19). Self-regulation theoretically involves various occupational groups establishing and maintaining their own standards and codes of practice, education, training, and disciplinary action. Co-regulation theoretically occurs when the state and occupational groups share the regulatory role. For example, practitioners would be legally required to belong to a government-accredited professional body which maintains its own standards other than those imposed by the government. Finally, statutory registration entails a state-regulated registry of members of a occupational group.

In Australia under the guidelines of Common Law complementary practitioners may practice within certain limitations without statutory registration. Common Law is based upon judicial decisions or the application of the “doctrine of precedent.” Complementary practitioners, however, are subject to “criminal and civil law sanctions...

[including] being subject to action in negligence or for a criminal act” and “consumer legislation such as the Fair Trading Act and Trade Practices Act” (Weir, 2000, pp. 4–5).

The Australian Constitution grants the authority to create statutory practitioner registration to the state and territorial governments. Health occupations with statutory registration in every state and territory include biomedicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, physiotherapy, psychology, optometry, podiatry, and most recently chiropractic and osteopathy. Since 2000, the state of Victoria has granted statutory registration for acupuncture and Chinese medicine.

Like most complementary practitioners in Australia, naturopaths function under Common Law which permits individuals to practice naturopathy without any training whatsoever. According to Fogliani and Khoury,

On face value this may appear to be problematic, however in reality, market-place forces prevent problems from arising. This is because without formal training a person cannot join a professional association. Without professional association membership, a practitioner cannot offer health fund rebates to their patients, obtain professional indemnity insurance or purchase practitioner-only therapeutic goods (Fogliani & Khoury, 2003, p. 4).

The development of naturopathy and natural therapies in Australia

Australian naturopathy appears to have drawn from both British and American naturopathy and became initially intricately intertwined with both osteopathy and chiropractic. Like in other countries, naturopaths function as the ultimate therapeutic eclectics. They regard disease as a response to bodily toxins and imbalances in a person’s social, psychic, and spiritual environment: germs are not the cause of disease per se but rather are parasites that take advantage of the body when it is in a weakened state. Because they believe that the healing power of nature, the *vis mediatrix naturae*, can restore one to health, naturopaths emphasize preventive health, education, and client responsibility. In the past, many naturopaths relied heavily on hydrotherapy (or water treatments), colonic irrigation, herbal medicine, dietetics, vitamin therapy, fasting, spinal manipulation, and exercise.

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