

The World Naturopathic Federation: global opportunities for the Australian profession

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Abstract

The World Naturopathic Federation was formally launched in Calgary, Canada in June 2015. Less than one year on, the WNF is in the process of developing formal relations with the World Health Organization and has members drawn from five continents. At the end of its founding year, Australia and Canada are the only countries with representation across all membership categories of the WNF, demonstrating a commitment across the entire spectrum of the naturopathic professions in these countries to connect with the international naturopathic community to advance the profession on a global and a local level. This paper highlights the history and efforts which have led to this momentous achievement, as well as the perspectives and experiences of organisations from each membership category within Australia. The potential contribution of the Australian naturopathic community and the opportunities to strengthen the profession within Australia through the WNF are also described from the viewpoint of organisations who have chosen to be involved.

Introduction

The first known use of the German term for 'naturopathy' ('Naturheilkunde') was in Europe over 200 years ago by the German physician Lorenz (1798-1835), although the exact date in which he first used the term remains unknown.¹ This term was also used by Sebastian Kneipp, teacher of both John Scheel and Benedict Lust – 'the English-speaking world naturopathic founders' – who popularised the word 'naturopathy' as the English name for their profession based on a bastardisation of the Latin "natura", nature, and the Greek "pathi", suffering. However, whilst the term 'naturopathy' remains a relatively new label for the profession, naturopathy is also the heir of various vitalistic healing traditions – such as Eclectic Medicine movement – that have a far longer history.²

The early growth of the profession of naturopathy appears to have two major sources: from Europe and the original German nature cure doctors, and from the North American students of those doctors, such as Benedict Lust who helped codify and promote the professionalization of

the profession into new lands. Some countries – including Australia – were hybrids, with early naturopathy being heavily shaped by German (via the United Kingdom) and North American influences.³ Whilst being the home of naturopathy, Europe itself was influenced by the global profession from an early stage: the development of the naturopathic profession in Spain, for example, grew largely from the efforts of José Castro Blanco who graduated from Lust's American School of Naturopathy in New York in 1922.¹ Since these early days the global naturopathic profession has spread to every continent except Antarctica and now has over 100,000 practitioners worldwide, with remarkable similarities in philosophical and clinical approaches to naturopathic practice.¹

However, while the history of the naturopathic profession predates many other recognised 'Western' traditional medical systems (for example, chiropractic or osteopathy), and naturopathic practitioners outnumber many of these disciplines, professional formation activities in the global naturopathic profession often remain far behind these other professions. The 'traditional medicine' professions of acupuncture,

Ayurveda, Chinese medicine, chiropractic, homeopathy, hydrotherapy and osteopathy all have international representative organisations, known as federations, that help the profession advance on a global scale. All major conventional health professions have similar international bodies. Such federations are vital for the growth and development of the health professions they represent.⁴ They are able to represent professional interests to large international organisations such as the World Health Organization; they help the profession transnationally to develop consensus on issues affecting their profession; they allow the global profession to learn from each other's successes and failures; and they provide the unity and strength required for the profession to not only tackle barriers to the growth of their profession they also provide the necessary unified approach to fully take advantage of the many opportunities that are presented to them as an international community.

To help foster and facilitate growth and development of the global naturopathic profession a similar organisation has recently been formed – the World Naturopathic Federation (WNF).

The formation of the WNF

The notion of creating an international organisation representing the interests of naturopathic medicine had been discussed by various naturopathic groups worldwide for a number of years.¹ The seeds for the Federation began in 2010 in Seattle, when John Weeks encouraged Dr Tabatha Parker and Dr Jon Wardle to combine their efforts facilitating links between African, Asian, Australasian, European and North American associations and education providers. These efforts continued and in 2013 the inaugural International Congress of Naturopathic Medicine in Paris facilitated an opportunity for more international organisations to collaborate and join efforts to organise.

Informal discussions in Paris led to formal efforts to create an official federation representing naturopathic medicine, a decision which was formally ratified by over 40 naturopaths from 30 different countries at the 2nd International Congress on Naturopathic Medicine in Paris in 2014. An Interim Committee, comprising naturopathic representatives from Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, India, New Zealand, Spain and the United States was formed, and within a year the administrative infrastructure had been developed and, after initial attempts to incorporate in Luxembourg proved impossible, the WNF was formally incorporated in Canada in 2015. The World Federation of Chiropractic (WFC) and the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) sponsored WNF delegates to attend the World Health Assembly in Geneva, where WNF entered the process of gaining formal relations with the World Health Organization.

In June 2015, the first official meeting of the WNF was held at the Canadian Association of Naturopathic

Doctors' conference in Calgary, where the first officers were elected. Dr Iva Lloyd (Canada) was elected president, with Drs Michael Cronin (USA), Tina Hausser (Spain) and Ysu Umbalo (DR Congo) also elected to executive positions. Dr Tabatha Parker (USA) and Dr Jon Wardle (Australia) were nominated as the inaugural Co-Secretary-Generals of the WNF.

Befitting its role as one of the major sources of naturopathic practice and development internationally, Australia has one of the largest delegations at WNF. Australia and Canada are the only countries with members in each of the major categories – full membership, associate membership and educational membership – and there has been Australian involvement since the WNF's outset. Given the strong Australian presence, it is important to understand why the WNF is important to Australian practitioners. Australian representatives from the WNF itself and an Australian representative from each of the major WNF membership categories give their insights into what a global naturopathic federation may mean for the Australian profession.

The World Naturopathic Federation: a global perspective (Jon Wardle)

There have been a number of international initiatives that greatly affect naturopathic medicine globally, but the lack of a formal representative organisation has often meant that naturopaths are not included in these conversations. As an example, the organisations involved in creation of the World Health Organization's *Benchmarks for Training in Naturopathy* document² are dominated by representatives of the Ayurvedic medicine, Chinese medicine and homeopathy professions rather than by naturopathic representatives. Such a scenario is clearly not ideal for the naturopathic profession. Similarly, there are a number of organisations that represent broader 'natural medicine' which are often in positions of influence regarding naturopathic medicine, despite membership being largely constituted of practitioners of other professions such as massage therapy, acupuncture or integrative medicine. These circumstances result in decisions, which affect naturopathy, being made by individuals and organisations which may not truly understand the unique needs of naturopathy as a discrete profession. The key mission of the WNF is to give naturopathic medicine a strong voice in international discussions, not just on matters that already directly affect the profession such as education and policy, but also to advocate for greater inclusion of naturopathic medicine in addressing global health priorities.

Whilst still in its nascent phase, the WNF has already taken on some individual projects. These include the most comprehensive survey of naturopathic medicine ever undertaken¹, which has been formally presented to WHO to assist them in their own work related to global traditional medicine professions. This survey uncovered

that the naturopathic profession globally is far more united by similarities in practice and philosophy than it is divided by differences. The survey found that globally there is almost unanimous agreement on the principles and philosophies guiding naturopathic practice, which runs counter to the claims of opponents that naturopathy has no true or legitimate doctrine – a view which can often affect the way in which practitioners are viewed within health system settings.⁵ Additionally, the survey found that the practice of naturopathic medicine only has minor variations internationally. This helps to deflate arguments, such as those seen in the recent *Natural Therapies for Private Health Insurance* report, that the impressive evidence-base for naturopathic medicine internationally cannot be transferred to the Australian setting.⁶

The WNF has also formed committees for the history and philosophy, research and professional mapping of naturopathy. The History And Philosophy Committee will document historical and philosophical underpinnings of naturopathic medicine. Once codified, these concepts will be available to appropriately inform decisions impacting on naturopathic medicine by international and national non-naturopathic organisations. They will be particularly useful to educate organisations that often prefer to define naturopathy by modalities (e.g. herbal medicine, nutrition etc.), rather than as a recognised system of medicine, on the importance of naturopathic philosophical principles in naturopathic practice. The Professional Mapping Committee is exploring the training, practice and legislative landscape for naturopaths globally. By identifying barriers to further recognition and integration, and highlight successful ways in which some countries have overcome such hurdles, this information can help individual countries develop strategies to grow and further integrate their professions, as well develop more friendly political environments for naturopathic practice. The Research Committee has been established to support world-renowned international naturopathic researchers in not only collecting and collating evidence that can be used to argue for a greater role for naturopathic medicine, but also to develop research strategies that can help advance the naturopathic profession.

One of the greatest benefits of the WNF is the facilitation – most of it informal – among naturopathic representatives from different countries. The Professional Mapping Committee is a collaborative effort led by New Zealand with Canadian and Australian education members. These committees represent the first international collaborative efforts for many naturopathic organisations. Regular meetings with the global profession have facilitated discussions which have led to new naturopathic projects for the advancement of the profession in India, Nicaragua, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Zambia. For the first time ever, the naturopathic profession has been given the organisational structure it needs to grow the profession

globally – including fostering the ability for naturopathic practitioners from all countries to be an active part of this process.

Further WNF work will be directed by members, based on the priorities they perceive as representatives of naturopathic practitioners globally. There are also ongoing discussions about possible collaborative projects between WNF and WHO. The WNF, whilst still being a very new organisation, has made tremendous progress. The achievements of the WNF far exceeds the progress of other global federations in similar time points, though it should be noted that WNF have had the benefit of the previous experiences of those other federations.⁴ Numerous stakeholders in the Australian government, business and non-government organisation sectors have indicated that having Australian representatives of a global naturopathic organisation recognised by WHO will not only facilitate more in-depth relations with these groups, but will also help to legitimise the naturopathic profession in Australia, which has been difficult while the profession has historically been so fragmented.

Full member: the Australian Naturopathic Federation (Natalie Cook)

The WNF provides an opportunity for Australian naturopaths to speak with one, united voice on issues of both domestic and international importance. The current state of the profession sees a number of associations with various constituencies representing the naturopaths of Australia.^{7,8} Full WNF membership is based on several criteria, philosophically led by the demonstrated commitment to high standards of education, training and professionalism as well as having naturopaths as their core member base. Whilst three Australian associations currently meet this requirement, only one vote is allocated per country – providing a positive catalyst for associations to collaborate on these key issues that unite them. The Australian Naturopathic Federation (ANF) was formed as a vehicle to allow Australian naturopaths to be represented in the WNF through a unified, Australian voice.

The ANF is open to all associations in Australia that meet the WNF criteria for full members and the terms of reference under which the federation operates are based on WNF guidelines as well as international best practice. This framework provides the mechanisms for the Australian associations to discuss and agree on Australia's position in this international forum. Importantly, it is the interests of the practitioners that are represented and so at its core, the ANF is based on the democratic premise of proportional representation for the naturopathic members.

Incorporated in 1920, the National Herbalists Association of Australia (NHAA) is not only the oldest complementary medicine association in Australia, but of the associations who meet full membership requirements

for the WNF – Australian Naturopathic Practitioners Association (ANPA), Complementary Medicine Association (CMA), and NHAA – those associations whose membership base is primarily naturopathic), the NHAA is also the largest. This unmatched longevity and membership support, backed by a long history of championing recognition for the profession as a whole, created a natural leadership role for the NHAA in forming the ANF. A NHAA board task force dedicated to seeing Australia join the WNF, drafted several iterations of the terms of reference throughout 2015. These were shared and discussed with our association peers and a deadline for Australia to be recognised as a Foundation member country provided the impetus for the NHAA to lodge an application on behalf of Australia at the end of 2015. The success of this application was a welcome validation and creates a springboard for improved inter-association collaboration.

The NHAA is proud to take the lead as the first to join the ANF and looks forward to working with other associations, as they too formalise this commitment. This is a significant milestone as it provides a framework to build on shared values to allow associations to work together more effectively for the benefit of the naturopathic profession in Australia at large. As the instigating signatory, the NHAA views joining the WNF as a critical step in ensuring we are best positioned to represent our members now and in the future. In the face of increasing pressure to maintain the validity and relevance of our profession within the wider healthcare community, this allows us to draw on best practice internationally and ensure our voice is heard clearly and consistently on the domestic front. For NHAA members this can create opportunities to participate in international working groups focussed on shared issues of global importance. Additionally, this initiative by the NHAA further serves as a demonstration of our commitment to lead the way in representing the best naturopaths in Australia.

Associate member: the Australian Register of Naturopaths and Herbalists (Amie Steel)

The WNF offers associate membership to naturopathic associations, organisations or institutions with goals or objectives that are consistent with those of WNF, or are useful to the aims of the WNF, but do not meet the criteria of full membership – usually due to the fact that they are not associations. Associate members generally have naturopaths as members of their organisation and must have the naturopathic profession as the focus of their organisation. Associate members are eligible to participate in working groups and committees, but are not afforded a full vote – this is limited to organisations that democratically represent naturopathic practitioners. Education accreditation agencies and independent registers are one form of organisation eligible for associate membership. The Australian Register of Naturopaths and

Herbalists (ARONAH) is an associate member of the WNF and as such is able to attend WNF meetings as an observer. ARONAH is also encouraged to participate in WNF working groups and have access to all materials and information the WNF provides to its members.

Associate membership of the WNF is seen by ARONAH as holding high value, not only to the naturopathic profession in Australia, but also as an important role in fulfilling its aims of protecting the public by ensuring high standards of practice and education in the Australian naturopathic profession. Firstly, through the WNF ARONAH sees great potential for further development of competency and practice standards in Australia. The current ARONAH competency standards have already been comprehensively benchmarked both nationally and internationally. One of the primary goals for this has been not only to strengthen and enhance our standards for practice in Australia – and to help assess international naturopathic graduates – but also to ensure Australian training standards allow Australian trained naturopaths to be able to practice elsewhere internationally. Already the WNF has afforded ARONAH a number of opportunities to connect with naturopathic accreditation and regulatory agencies from other countries to discuss the issue of practitioner transportability across countries. Although formal arrangements will take some time, the scenario of Australian-trained naturopaths being internationally recognised is, for the first time ever, becoming a foreseeable reality.

These meetings have also resulted in agreements to collaborate on an international level and develop closer working relationships between agencies, including the foundations of a trans-Tasman agreement with New Zealand. ARONAH has also been invited to observe accreditation visits by the North American Council of Naturopathic Medicine Education. Importantly, ARONAH's presence in these meetings has also afforded the opportunity to describe the high level of practice competency amongst the Australian naturopathic community and the standard of care to which Australian naturopaths are committed – dispelling many previously held assumptions by the international community that the unregulated nature of Australian naturopathy implied lower standards. Most notably, ARONAH has contributed to the Professional Mapping Committee, which has members from North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific and Africa working closely together to identify the regulatory and legislative landscape underlying the practice of naturopathy around the world. Through its role in this subcommittee ARONAH is able to assist the WNF to identify the supports and barriers impacting on the global advancement of naturopathy. Through this process ARONAH is also able to learn from the experiences of naturopaths in other countries, many of which have faced – and overcome – similar challenges to the naturopathic profession as we face here in Australia.

Educational member: Endeavour College of Natural Health (Carolyn Barker)

Educational membership of the WNF is available to any educational organisations or institutions that offer a naturopathic training program that meets minimum WHO benchmarks (1500 hours), trains to the highest level recognised in their country (in Australia this means degree-level education) and shares the goals and objectives of the WNF, or are useful to the aims of the WNF. Educational members are invited to attend meetings as observers but they are not afforded a vote. Like associate members, educational members are encouraged to participate on WNF working groups and have access to all materials and information the WNF may provide to its members. Endeavour College of Natural Health made the decision to join the WNF in 2015 as an educational member and actively contribute to its activities.

Australia is a unique environment amongst the global naturopathic landscape in that it has one of the largest degree-conferring college structures with a national footprint and governed by a national regulator. This means Endeavour has a responsibility to connect this burgeoning cohort of tertiary trained naturopaths with the world stage, and to ensure there is a consistent quality output of graduating students into the profession thereby enabling ongoing opportunities for its graduates – both nationally and internationally. Because Endeavour have so many practitioner degrees it is essential we maintain close relationships with global partners in practitioner education. Through international collaborative efforts such as WNF, Endeavour has initiated formal collaborative projects with naturopathic education providers in Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Through WNF networks, Endeavour has also been able to initiate collaborative discussions with naturopathic educators not previously familiar to the Australian profession – such as those in France, Spain and Zambia.

One of Endeavour's publically stated organisational goals relates to stakeholder relationships. The naturopathic profession has always been – and continues to be – the largest discipline of Endeavour's five practitioner degree offerings. Therefore the responsibility to maintain relationships with stakeholders such as associations, federations and other registering bodies is important. Within that framework, being an educational member of the WNF means we have a voice at the global naturopathic table and an ability to present the Australian approach to the education of naturopathy to the international naturopathic community. Conversely, through our involvement in the WNF we can better understand global developments in naturopathic practice and education and ensure that our students understand the international trends in naturopathic medicine by linking these insights back to our curriculum. We believe this affords our graduates a far greater world view of the opportunities for contemporary naturopathic practice

and the possibilities for the profession they are entering. We also believe that the insights gained from these collaborative endeavours result in improved educational, clinical and practical outcomes for our students.

Endeavour is also uniquely placed in the Australian educational context to provide pathways (e.g. such as between complementary and conventional medical education; between vocational and higher education; between practice and research). This is a core capability of the organisation and therefore mapping at a local, regional and global level is an extension of how we think about continuing formal education and continuing professional development. To that end, we are committed to sharing our expertise and learn from our counterparts from other countries through the professional mapping sub-committee. Endeavour joins Canadian (Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine) and New Zealand (Wellpark College of Natural Therapies) educational members on this Committee.

As a private higher education provider in the Australian context we are often viewed as a teaching higher education institution that adopts appropriate scholarship practices for its academics. Endeavour has chosen to take this one step further by establishing an Office of Research in partnership with the Australian Research Centre in Complementary and Integrative Medicine (ARCCIM) at the University of Technology Sydney. We have made this decision in order to invest in the next generation of rigorous and scientific practitioner-driven research. Through the WNF we see an opportunity to contribute to the global advancement of naturopathic research, through collaborations with other members but also WNF initiatives such as the WNF Research Committee. The growth of the naturopathic profession globally is good for the growth of the naturopathic profession locally. Not only does Endeavour have an active interest in supporting the Australian naturopathic profession, a strong naturopathic profession is essential to the continuing success of Endeavour. From Endeavour's perspective, being an educational member of the WNF is not in name only. It is to be heard, to contribute to and gain from what is happening within the naturopathic profession globally.

Conclusion

The future of global health brings numerous challenges and opportunities, many of which will affect naturopathic medicine. The shifting burden of disease, for example, makes naturopathy an ideal primary health care choice,⁹ but it is an opportunity for which the profession itself needs to advocate for a greater role. The naturopathic profession needs to meet these challenges and opportunities from a position of strength and unity. Developing a global community of naturopaths through the WNF will not only have an impact on the naturopathic profession and individual practitioners all over the world, it will also help patients the world over by facilitating greater access to naturopathic medicine for everyone.

Disclosure Statement

JW has associations with WNF and ARONAH. AS has associations with ARONAH and Endeavour. NC has association with NHAA. CB has association with Endeavour.

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