

## **Naturopaths & Herbalist Association of Australia's Submission for the Australian Government Inquiry into the Issues related to menopause and perimenopause.**

*Thank you for the opportunity and invitation to make a submission for the "Inquiry into the issues related to menopause and perimenopause".*

### **Executive Summary:**

Naturopathy is a system of health care which is based on traditional philosophies and principles and utilises a wide variety of tools and techniques to achieve health and wellbeing for a patient. It is estimated that naturopathic practitioners consult with approximately 6% of the Australian population, equating to some 1.5 million Australians, engaging in around four million consultations each year (Steel et al, 2018). Naturopaths in Australia are required to complete Bachelor level training. They are consulted for a diverse range of health issues, including diagnosed conditions and transitional stages in a lifespan such as perimenopause and menopause.

This submission focuses on TOR b, c, and f, and was prepared by the Naturopaths & Herbalists Association Australia (NHAA) Sexual and Reproductive Health Special Interest Group.

## Introduction about the NHAAL:

The NHAAL is the peak professional association for the naturopathy and Western herbal medicine profession in Australia. Established in 1920, it is also the oldest professional association of complementary medicine therapists in the country. The NHAAL represents around 2,000 practitioners and is currently chair of the World Naturopathic Federation (WNF) which represents naturopathic practitioners globally.

Our members provide primary care services to people suffering from both acute and chronic diseases. We use a combination of therapies, including diet, exercise, stress management, nutritional supplementation, and herbal medicine formulations to deliver holistic treatments. We work alongside other health care professionals to support conventional treatment. We play an important role in public health, including the quality use of medicines by Australian consumers.

The NHAAL publishes the quarterly *Australian Journal of Herbal & Naturopathic Medicine (AJHNM)*. The AJHNM publishes material on all aspects of medical herbalism and naturopathic practice including philosophy, phytochemistry, pharmacology and clinical application of medicinal plants in a variety of acute and chronic disease states and illnesses. The NHAAL also holds educational events regularly, including an annual international symposium.

Since its inception, the NHAAL and its members have been at the forefront of naturopathic and Western herbal medicine and have been strongly influential in areas ranging from policy, education and practice, to ethical, regulatory and industry standards. This includes sponsoring a health technology assessment of naturopathy (<https://worldnaturopathicfederation.org/project/health-technology-assessment-naturopathy/>) in partnership with the World Naturopathic Federation and the Australian Research Consortium in Complementary and Integrative Medicine (University of Technology Sydney).

More information on NHAAL can be found here: <https://nhaa.org.au/>

The NHAAL's Sexual and Reproductive Health SIG was formed in 2023, and includes a selected group of experienced clinicians, educators and researchers with a specific focus in this field.

## Terms of reference (TOR):

**b. the physical health impacts, including menopausal and perimenopausal symptoms, associated medical conditions such as menorrhagia, and access to healthcare services;**

**1. Physical Health Impacts:** Menopause and perimenopause bring about a diverse range of physical, mental and emotional symptoms. Often the impacts of these symptoms on the individual are overlooked for their severity or potential impact on a person's quality of life (QoL). Studies have shown that QoL of women experiencing perimenopause and menopause is decreased or impaired compared to those women in pre-menopause and post-menopausal status (Hutchings et al, 2023). Those that experience vaginal physical changes and symptoms which are typically progressive, report major impacts on sexual function and physical pain, self-perception, and body image (Moral et al, 2018).

In a 2023 online survey investigating the experiences of individuals at all stages of menopause, 81.8% of respondents reported sleep disturbances, closely followed by hot flushes or night sweats (80.7%) and forgetfulness or memory problems (75.6%). Genitourinary and sexual health symptoms were highly prevalent with 73% of respondents reporting symptoms of incontinence. Additionally, 68.3% reported a lower sex drive and 42% of all respondents experienced dry vagina or painful sexual intercourse.

### Addressing Issues:

Biomedicine<sup>1</sup> often focuses on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for symptom management. Whilst these approaches are important, other treatments that address the individual and their experience of menopause may offer further support to an overlooked cohort of individuals.

**a. Naturopathic preventive and personalised approaches:** Incorporating preventive approaches involves lifestyle modifications, dietary changes, and herbal and nutritional supplements. Naturopaths are highly skilled in these evidence-based interventions and can provide personalised guidance tailored to an individual's needs. They work with the individual to anticipate future disease risk and apply preventative strategies, with likely benefits to risk reduction for bone mineral density, cardiometabolic health and cognition.

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<sup>1</sup> Biomedicine is a system in which medical doctors and other health care professionals (such as nurses, pharmacists, and therapists) treat symptoms and diseases using drugs, radiation, or surgery.

<https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/biomedicine>

Menopause and perimenopause are highly individualised lived experiences. What works for one person may not be suitable for another. Addressing nuanced experiences requires a holistic understanding of an individual's health, lifestyle, values, and preferences. Recognising that symptoms manifest uniquely in each individual, there is a need for personalised treatment plans. Naturopathy is a form of integrative health care, which means it combines biomedical and non-biomedical care. The integrative health care model allows for a more tailored approach to address specific, often overlooked symptoms and in doing so offers a broader perspective that addressing symptoms which may not be addressed through biomedical care alone.

**2. Access to Healthcare Services:** Access to healthcare services during menopause and perimenopause is essential for proper diagnosis, management, and overall well-being. However, individuals often encounter barriers such as lack of awareness, stigma, and insufficient support.

#### **Addressing Issues:**

**a. Education and Awareness Programs:** Menopausal symptoms are diverse and clinicians need to be aware of the broad range of prescribed care and self-care strategies available to support individuals. Implementing education and awareness programs can empower individuals to seek timely healthcare. This community education approach is vital as many women are unaware of the symptoms of peri-menopause and therefore do not seek treatment or support. However, it is also important for health care professionals to be better educated in how to provide appropriate and relevant support to the demographic of women who are experiencing peri-menopause and menopause and in doing so ensure timely, effective and acceptable care is delivered.

**b. Integration of Naturopathic Care:** Collaborative healthcare models that integrate naturopathic care alongside biomedical care can offer a more holistic approach. Naturopaths can contribute valuable insights into lifestyle modifications, nutritional interventions, and evidence-based complementary or alternative therapies.

**c. The mental and emotional well-being of individuals experiencing menopause and perimenopause, considering issues like mental health, self-esteem, and social support;**

**3. Mental and Emotional impacts:** Perimenopause and menopause have significant repercussions on an individual's mental health and wellbeing. In the 2023 online survey by Huang et al, psychological symptoms were reported by 72.4% of menopausal or perimenopausal women with low or depressed mood (66.6%) being most common, followed by anxiety or panic attacks (59.7%) (Huang et al, 2023).

These types of symptoms are considered to be related to complex factors including biological changes in hormone levels and social stigma associated with the condition. Mental health issues are also exacerbated in cases where fertility is desired, especially for those experiencing premature ovarian insufficiency (POI) (Panay et al, 2021). Changes in physical appearance and other symptoms associated with menopause, such as weight gain or alterations in skin texture, can also impact self-esteem and body image.

### **Addressing Issues:**

Biomedicine often focus on antidepressants to address the psychological consequences and general guidelines on exercise and self-care. Whilst these approaches are important other supportive care models that address the individual and their experience of menopause may offer additional support to an overlooked sector of individuals.

**a. Integrated Mental Health Services:** Integrating mental health services into menopausal care is imperative. This involves collaborating with mental health professionals who understand the unique challenges individuals may face during this transition, providing targeted interventions when needed.

**b. Promoting Awareness and Education:** Raising awareness about the potential mental health impacts of menopause and perimenopause is required. This includes education of the individual as well as family, friends, workplaces and community groups.

Educating family members and friends about the emotional challenges associated with menopause encourages empathy and understanding, fostering a supportive environment at home.

**c. Naturopathic and Integrative Care Programs:** Implementing holistic wellness programs that encompass physical, mental, and emotional aspects can contribute to positive self-esteem. These programs may include individualised holistic support and therapies, fitness routines, mindfulness practices, and counselling support.

**d. The level of awareness amongst medical professionals and patients of the symptoms of menopause and perimenopause and the treatments, including the affordability and availability of treatments;**

**4. Risk of drug/herb and drug/supplement interactions:** Many individuals experiencing perimenopause take over the counter herbal and nutritional supplements for symptoms of menopause and perimenopause, believing they are safe, and without disclosing this use to their medical providers (Swan & Alexander, 2024).

**Addressing Issues:**

Degree-qualified naturopaths are trained to understand and review potential drug-supplement interactions, advise patients on safety, as well as direct them to disclose their natural medicine intake to medical care providers. In a practical sense, this collaborative patient management has strong potential to improve safety, efficacy and cost.

## References

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