

National Herbalists Association of Australia Submission to the 2020 Summit

Founded in 1920, the NHAA is the oldest natural therapies association in Australia, and the only national professional body of medical herbalists maintaining the highest standards for herbalists and naturopaths in Australia.

Healthcare in Australia is currently under severe pressure. Shortages of staff, beds and facilities in hospitals reduce available options for treatment. Surgery waiting lists keep growing. A shortage of general practitioners leads patients to present at emergency departments, further exacerbating the pressures. Meanwhile patients with chronic illness or pain continue suffering.

While considered use of medications lightens this load, increased use of drug therapy has brought greater costs to the PBS, with increased hospitalisations and associated costs due to adverse reactions. The recent tragic example of COX inhibitors highlights this concern.

Health promotion and preventive medicine have been proven to reduce the burden of illness and its costs to Treasury, the economy, and quality of life. Whilst doctors, pharmacists and other health professionals agree that preventive approaches such as diet and lifestyle are important, many are too busy to provide additional time for patient education about this critical issue. Preventive medicine and health promotion are fundamental principles in the practice of complementary medicine, coupled with the judicious use of complementary therapies and medicines. Greater use of complementary medicines and practitioners is the ideal way to achieve this, for the following reasons:

- Complementary practitioners such as naturopaths and herbalists design their workload so there is ample time to educate patients in diet, lifestyle and other aspects of health promotion.
- Complementary medicines such as herbs and nutritional supplements available over-the-counter are associated with a lower risk of adverse reactions, as evidenced by their AUST L status, and in many cases are safer than prescription drugs.
- Complementary medicine, skilfully employed, can be highly effective in many conditions which would otherwise require drug management or eventually progress to serious conditions requiring hospitalisation. These include many cases of rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, insulin-resistant diabetes and hypertension. This is supported by multiple randomised clinical trials published in peer-reviewed journals.
- Herbalists and naturopaths are highly trained, well-educated in the medical sciences, and qualified to recognise and refer serious conditions.
- There is a growing body of scientific evidence to back up the empirical experience of these professional practitioners.
- Complementary medicine is already well accepted by over 60% of the Australian population.
- Complementary medicines and consultations are paid for out-of-pocket by patients. This immediately reduces costs to Medicare, places no additional financial burden on the Government, and reduces future health costs.

Clearly, it is in the best interests of the government to promote greater use of complementary health practitioners.

In an unregulated system where anyone can practise as a natural therapist, it is difficult for members of the public or doctors to distinguish the highly trained and skilled practitioner from the poorly trained or untrained charlatan. The inability for medical practitioners to distinguish between fully trained and bogus complementary practitioners acts as a barrier to effective communication. Regulation will improve communication between doctors and natural therapists. This has been done successfully for Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners in Victoria. The Victorian government has also strongly recommended registration of naturopaths and herbalists.

Utilisation of this well-trained, work-ready force has the potential to dramatically reduce costs of healthcare and enhance quality of life for many Australians.