



Founded 1920
ABN 25 000 009 932

14th March 2009

The National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission
PO Box 685
Woden ACT 2606

Dear Dr Bennett,

This is a submission on behalf of the National Herbalists Association of Australia (NHAA) in response to the National Health and Hospital Reform Commission (NHHRC) Interim Report. The NHAA represents professional practitioners of Western Herbal Medicine and Naturopathy and has done so since 1920. Full details of the NHAA are available from our website at www.nhaa.org.au including our membership and training requirements and codes of ethics and conduct.

The NHAA is very supportive of the themes elucidated within the report and believe the adoption of the reforms suggested will lead to a healthier Australian community. I will address each theme individually within the text of this letter.

Taking Responsibility

The experience of many of our members is of a population who believe that one goes to a doctor only when ill, in order to be “fixed”. This belief, to some extent, has been engendered by a health system that until recently has almost exclusively focused on an illness model of medicine.

As practitioners of wholistic medicine, our members see their role not only as practitioners, but also as educators, working with people who have taken a decision to play an active role in their own health management. Our members actively encourage clients to take responsibility for their health by assisting them to make appropriate dietary and lifestyle decisions to ensure a long and illness free life. This approach includes encouragement to have appropriate screening to detect and treat disease at the earliest possible stage of development.

Our members see their role as practitioners of a wellness model of medicine and have the training and expertise to assist people to make the healthy diet and lifestyle choices that will help prevent the development of the chronic illnesses overburdening the current health system.

Connecting Care

Our members are used as primary health care providers by many people because of the relationship and level of trust they develop with their practitioner over time. If an issue is beyond the scope of a practitioner they will refer their client for diagnosis and treatment by a suitable General Practitioner. Often the referred client continues to take the medications prescribed by their naturopath or herbalist, frequently without the knowledge of the GP, which leaves potential for unwanted interactions. As part of connecting care our members would like to have their records included as part of the health management of clients. The inclusion of such information will allow for better quality care for the client without unnecessary incidents due to the client not telling the GP what they are taking and the GP not asking. Herbalists and Naturopaths need to be included in the care of their clients.

Facing Inequities

The social profile of people utilising the services of our members includes mostly those with a higher education within a higher income bracket. The reason being, that our professions are not subsidised in any way by government and rebates available through health funds are minimal. Despite this, the potential for reduced costs across the public health sector is enormous if these practitioners were utilised across the nation. Whilst the NHA recognises it is unlikely that visits to a Herbalist or a Naturopath will ever be supported under Medicare, the skills and knowledge these practitioners possess would be useful in assisting people of lower socioeconomic position to overcome chronic illness. Perhaps including these professions into the 'health teams' approved under Medicare funding could be considered by the NHHRC.

Including these professions into the health care system and optimally utilising them has the potential to improve health outcomes for all Australians.

Driving Quality Performance

Herbalists and Naturopaths are a highly trained and skilled, yet under utilised workforce. Their expertise lies in the areas of health promotion, disease prevention and treatment of long term chronic illnesses. The biggest hurdle to the integration of these professions into a wellness model of health is the failure by successive governments to recognise the value of such practitioners to the health of the nation. By utilising Herbalists and Naturopaths in a health promotion role the government stands to reduce costs within the health system, make savings on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and improve the quality of life for hundreds of thousands of Australians.

The NHA asks that the NHHRC recommend to the government that a national registration scheme for Herbalists and Naturopaths be established so that these valuable practitioners may be utilised in promoting A Healthier Future for All Australians.

We have, since our foundation in 1920, worked toward such a registration scheme and stand ready to assist the Government in any way in moving towards this goal.

I thank you in advance for considering this feedback.

Sincerely
John Baxter
President
National Herbalists Association of Australia