

Health Technology Assessment – Naturopathy

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The World Naturopathic Federation undertook the task of compiling a Health Technology Assessment (HTA) on naturopathy to provide an evidence-based summary of naturopathic practice and the safety, economics, and effectiveness of naturopathic care. Naturopathic doctors Iva Lloyd, Amie Steel, and Jon Wardle were the lead authors on the project.

The HTA resulted in a 750-page report, which took four years to complete.¹ It was truly a global effort, with 51 naturopaths/naturopathic doctors (NDs) and 60 reviewers contributing to the HTA. The project was made possible due to the generous financial contribution of the Naturopaths and Herbalists Association of Australia (NHAA). The contributors from Canada included Dr. Iva Lloyd, ND (as lead editor of the HTA) and the following NDs from the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine: Monique Aucoin, Valentina Cordozo, Kieran Cooley, Deborah Kennedy, Paul Saunders, and Dugald Seely. Reviewers from Canada included NDs Tasnim Adatya, Anne-Hélène Genné, Verna Hunt, Colleen McQuarrie, Michelle Richea, Jim Spring, and Pat Wales.

The protocol and methods for the HTA were drafted in line with the World Health Organization (WHO) HTA guidelines, adapted to meet the specific requirements and nature of the naturopathic profession. The scope of the HTA was informed by research conducted by the international naturopathic community over the last 30 years encompassing over 2,000 peer-reviewed scientific articles, including more than 300 clinical studies involving over 100 different health populations. Seven international surveys on various aspects of naturopathic practice were also conducted to support the HTA.

The HTA on naturopathy serves two main goals. The first is to clarify the status of the global naturopathic profession, and the second is to address key questions raised by policy-makers, accreditors, regulators, and those looking to further understand the breadth and depth of the naturopathic profession and naturopathic practice.

GLOBAL STATUS OF THE NATUROPATHIC PROFESSION

The HTA provides a global and unified understanding of the naturopathic profession. The key points outlined in this report include the following:

- Naturopathy is a traditional system of medicine originating in Europe that is now part of Traditional and Complementary Medicine (T&CM) around the world.
- The naturopathic philosophies of *vitalism* (an innate intelligence of living organisms) and *holism* (the body is a complex adaptive system that exists as a unified whole) embrace every aspect of naturopathic care and are supported by the seven naturopathic principles.
- Several theoretical and conceptual frameworks inform naturopaths'/NDs' clinical reasoning and decision-making. The main theories included in the HTA are the Naturopathic Therapeutic Order, Emunctory Theory and Theory of Complex Systems
- Naturopathic practice is characterized by specific assessment, diagnosis, and treatment approaches that can successfully bridge traditional and biomedical approaches to patient care.
- Naturopaths/NDs treat patients throughout the span of their life. Naturopathic care focuses on prevention and chronic conditions, but also treats patients with acute conditions and those in palliative care.
- Naturopathic practice is complex and multi-modal and incorporates core naturopathic therapies, modalities, and practices, including applied nutrition, clinical nutrition, herbal medicine, lifestyle modification, mind-body medicine counselling, naturopathic physical medicine, hydrotherapy, and other therapies, based on jurisdictional regulations and naturopathic education.
- There is strong consensus on the core naturopathic modalities used in practice, with a typical naturopathic visit generally involving the prescription, recommendation, or use of an average of four different naturopathic therapeutic modalities or practices.
- The naturopathic profession includes more than 110,000 naturopaths/NDs practising in over 107 countries spanning all WHO regions.
- Naturopaths/NDs are actively engaged in various forms of community education and health promotion activities and are well suited to play a more formal role in public health initiatives aimed at increasing health literacy.

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KEY QUESTIONS ASKED BY POLICY-MAKERS

What Are the Risks and Economics Associated with Naturopathic Practice?

“Chapter 7: Safety and Risks of Naturopathic Practice” provides research and rationale supporting the statement that direct risks associated with naturopathic care have been reported very infrequently and that the vast majority are minor. It describes the main categories of risk associated with naturopathic practice and reports that these are similar to any other health profession that employs a broad scope of practice. “Chapter 8: Economics of Naturopathic Care” provides a review of naturopathic cost-effectiveness research and outlines that naturopathic care is cost-effective, particularly for longer-term and chronic conditions and for persons with a higher disease burden.

What Regulation Currently Exists for the Naturopathic Workforce?

Regulation involving the naturopathic workforce follows several legislative frameworks, including voluntary certification, co-regulation, negative licensing and occupational licensing or statutory regulation. Thanks to the support of a regulatory consultant, “Chapter 5: Regulation of the Naturopathic Workforce” provides a detailed review of the global regulatory status of the naturopathic profession and provides policy-makers with the rationale to support statutory regulation of the naturopathic profession globally. There are currently 34 WHO Member States (countries) with some form of statutory regulation for the naturopathic workforce. There are also 21 Member States across three WHO regions, including the European region, the Americas, and the Western Pacific region, with voluntary certification regimens.

What Are the Naturopathic Educational Standards?

“Chapter 6: Educational Standards for the Naturopathic Workforce” provides an overview of the status of naturopathic education globally. There are 131 naturopathic educational programs globally, with 39% residing in the South-East Asian region, 27% in the European region, 22% in the region of the Americas, 6% in the Western Pacific region, and 6% in the African region. There are two main types of naturopathic educational programs emerging globally: the doctorate-level training programs, at over 4,000 hours, which currently represents 52% of all programs, and the practitioner-level training programs, at 2,500 hours.

What Research Is There to Support Naturopathic Practice?

The bulk of the HTA addresses the research question. Chapter 14 outlines the importance of researching naturopathy as a total system of traditional medicine when designing and conducting research on naturopathic practice. Chapter 15 provides a closer exploration of the challenges and advancements that

contemporary health research offers to naturopathic research and the opportunities that naturopathic research can provide to other areas of health research. Chapter 16 indicates that the international naturopathic research community has been actively publishing peer-reviewed research literature for over 30 years and has demonstrated a sustained commitment to codifying existing knowledge, generating new knowledge, and disseminating this knowledge to the naturopathic and wider allied-health clinical and research communities. Naturopathic research is conducted in most of the educational institutions that have a naturopathic program, especially in the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, India, and New Zealand.

The twelve chapters in Section 5 summarize 235 original clinical research papers outlining the effectiveness of naturopathic care for the main conditions researched by the naturopathic profession and commonly treated by naturopaths/NDs. It also includes references to the 1,456 journal articles, including observational studies, reviews, and meta-analyses, related to health conditions. It highlights that naturopathic researchers have conducted original clinical research involving 81 different illness populations, including cancer, cardiovascular, complex immune, endocrine, gastrointestinal, mental health, musculoskeletal, neurological, skin, women’s health.

Naturopathic practice is known for its complexity and flexibility, with a range of treatments, therapies, and practices. The twelve chapters in Section 6 summarize over 300 clinical research papers on naturopathic therapeutics and practices for over 140 conditions. It highlights how such treatments are employed—singularly and in combination—by naturopaths/NDs, both in naturopathic clinical interventions and at times in collaboration with other health-care settings, and features pragmatic elements, such as multimodal interventions, flexibility in administration, and real-world settings. It also includes references to the 1,203 peer-reviewed observational studies, reviews, and meta-analyses examining the broad range of therapies commonly used in naturopathic practice. The naturopathic therapeutic modalities and practices highlighted in this section include complex naturopathic interventions, applied nutrition, clinical nutrition, herbal medicine, lifestyle modifications, mind–body medicine counselling, naturopathic physical medicine, hydrotherapy, acupuncture, yoga, and research on pharmaceutical-based interventions or comparisons.

CONCLUSION

In summation, the HTA highlights that naturopathy is one of the most common traditional and complementary medicine professions globally and has a practice presence in all WHO regions. Naturopathic practice is therapeutically diverse, with a consistent holistic and person-centred approach and a core philosophical and traditional knowledge framework that focuses on the effective prioritization of non-invasive or non-pharmacological interventions and preventive care. Naturopathy/naturopathic medicine is a safe and effective therapeutic intervention that has utility across different geographic regions, clinical settings, and conditions, and naturopathic practitioners

are trusted and consulted by the global public for a wide range of conditions.

Given the promising emerging evidence base for naturopathy/naturopathic medicine shown in this HTA, it is warranted that individual policy-decision makers consider how to regulate and integrate naturopathy/naturopathic medicine in the manner most appropriate to their setting.

The full HTA is available as an e-book at
<https://worldnaturopathicfederation.org/project/health-technology-assessment-naturopathy/>

For a hard copy of the HTA please contact the WNF at
info@worldnaturopathicfederation.org.

All proceeds from the HTA will go towards supporting regulation of the naturopathic profession globally.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

I have read and understood the CAND Journal's policy on conflicts of interest and declare that I have none.

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REFERENCES

1. Lloyd I, Steel A, Wardle J, eds. *Naturopathy—Practice, Effectiveness, Utility, Costs & Safety*. World Naturopathic Federation; 2021. <http://worldnaturopathicfederation.org/health-technology-assessment-hta/>