

From Roots to Research: A Research Strategy for the Naturopathic Profession in Europe



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ABSTRACT

Naturopathy is a traditional medicine system originating in Europe and is practiced in 108 countries worldwide, representing the most geographically diverse traditional medicine in the modern era. However, the European roots of the naturopathic profession are still prevalent, with just over half of the international population of naturopathic practitioners in European countries. Despite the history and size of the naturopathic profession in Europe, only 8.8% of the more than 2000 peer-reviewed research publications produced by naturopathic researchers in the last 30 years are based on studies conducted by researchers in Europe. In 2019, representatives from the World Naturopathic Federation (WNF) European Regional Group met in Lyon, France, to develop a strategy for naturopathy research in Europe. Attendees represented naturopathic organizations in France, Belgium, Spain, Ireland, and the Czech Republic. The outcome was a co-designed strategy based on shared ideas and goals, linked to implementation activities. The goals for the first four years were: (1) Establish research capacity through research training and infrastructure; (2) Strengthen research training and infrastructure; (3) Secure continued research capacity through formalized research training in naturopathic courses; (4) Establish research-sustainability through university-level naturopathic education. While the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the timeline of initiating this strategy, the priorities, goals, and planned activities remain the same for the WNF European Regional Group. The strategy not only reflects a vision for the future of the profession in Europe, it also reflects an acknowledgement that the European naturopathic community is not only the custodian of the historical roots of the global naturopathic profession but also has an important role to play in its future.

Key Words Naturopathy, naturopathic medicine, health workforce, capacity-building.

INTRODUCTION

Naturopathy is a traditional medicine system originating in Europe, with Germany recognized as the traditional home to naturopathy.¹ While naturopathy was first codified in the late 1800s, it draws upon knowledge about health and healing arising from much earlier times.² Despite its European roots, naturopathy is currently practiced in 108 countries worldwide, and represents the most geographically diverse traditional system of medicine of the modern era.¹ The global naturopathic profession consistently identifies core philosophies and principles that underpin clinical care; however, the specific therapeutic tools employed in naturopathic practice are influenced by local cultural, historical, and regulatory factors, resulting in some modalities being considered core to practice in certain locations (e.g., yoga in India, homeopathy in Europe, acupuncture in Canada) yet used less frequently elsewhere.¹

In Europe, naturopathy is practiced in more than 30 countries and the naturopathic profession includes over 60,000 (of the global total of 110,000) naturopathic practitioners.¹ Despite the history and size of the naturopathic profession in Europe, only

8.8% of the more than 2000 peer-reviewed research publications produced by naturopathic researchers in the last 30 years represent studies conducted by researchers in Europe.³ This disparity may be due, in part, to the regulatory and educational environment of the European naturopathic profession: ten countries have regulatory mechanisms in place for the naturopathic profession and eleven countries offer a total of 36 naturopathic educational programs.¹ Of these courses, there are only four known European examples of naturopathic institutions establishing research institutions, or naturopathic practitioners with research qualifications being housed in leading national and international research centres focused on naturopathy. In contrast, there are nine naturopathic programs in North America and seven research centres meeting these criteria.³ This difference may be in part due to the naturopathic educational programs in Europe being delivered by private providers and existing outside of the established university sector. As such, they have limited access to research infrastructure and training, which hinders research capacity-building in Europe.

This gap affects the advancement of Europe's naturopathic profession, as research training is a critical component of a profession's

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ability to communicate findings from practice, examine the evidence underpinning practices, and build evidence-informed practitioners. The North American naturopathic professional community collaborated in 2006 to develop an agenda for advancing naturopathic medical research.⁴ Their efforts were focused on identifying key research questions that naturopathic research and researchers were well-placed to answer. These important efforts were not, however, aimed at advancing the research capacity of the naturopathic profession in any one world region. This article presents a strategy developed by representatives of the World Naturopathic Federation (WNF) European Regional Group with the aim of building a strong future for naturopathic research in their region.

World Naturopathic Federation European Regional Group Research Strategy Meeting

In 2019, representatives from the WNF European Regional Group met in Lyon, France, to develop a research strategy for naturopathy in Europe. Attendees represented naturopathic organizations in France, Belgium, Spain, Ireland, and the Czech Republic (see Table 1). The meeting was facilitated by Dr. Amie Steel, from the Australian Research Centre in Complementary and Integrative Medicine (University of Technology Sydney, Australia). Over the course of the one-day meeting, Dr. Steel presented a model for understanding research capacity, and the participants explored the naturopathic research environment in Europe. They then co-designed a strategy based on shared ideas and goals. The

TABLE 1 Representatives contributing to the WNF European Regional Group Research Strategy Meeting

| Attendee | Organization | Country |
|-------------------------|---|----------------|
| Anne Portier | OMNES | France |
| Maité Diharce | OMNES | France |
| Fatiha Aït Said | ISNAT | Belgium |
| Tina Hausser | OCN FENACO | Spain |
| Dr. Maria Makeeva | OCN FENACO | Spain |
| Dr. Alioune Diaw | FENA | France |
| Marian Mulligan | Sphenoid Ireland CLG/Irish Institute of Naturopathic Medicine | Ireland |
| Kate Boesenberg | Škola Klinické Naturopatie | Czech Republic |
| Dominick Leaud-Zacohval | Aesculape Ecole Libre de Naturopathie | France |
| Facilitators | Organization | Country |
| Dr. Amie Steel | Australian Research Centre in Complementary and Integrative Medicine, University of Technology Sydney | Australia |
| Cherie Caut | Australian Research Centre in Complementary and Integrative Medicine, University of Technology Sydney | Australia |

WNF: World Naturopathic Federation; OMNES: Organisation de la Médecine Naturelle et de l'Éducation Sanitaire; ISNAT: Institut Supérieur de Naturopathie Traditionnelle; OCN FENACO: Organización Colegial Naturopática – Federación Española de Asociaciones de Naturópatas; FENA: Fédération Française de Naturopathie.

participants then applied these foundational principles to develop strategic goals and implementation activities. A summary of these final outcomes is provided below.

Priorities and Planning Areas

The professional representatives agreed they needed to set 10-year priorities for the European region. These were:

1. Identifying steps to establish research pathways from existing naturopathic programs for graduates.
2. Developing and providing research training opportunities for naturopathic practitioners in the region (i.e., research skills development workshops).
3. Identifying Europe-based naturopathic practitioners with appropriate qualifications, strong written English skills, and an interest in pursuing a research career, and fostering these practitioners to become “Research Champions” for the region.
4. Establishing practice-based research networks in the region.

From these longer-term priorities, the meeting participants agreed on five immediate priorities:

1. Explore opportunities to build research training into the curriculum
2. Expose faculty to more research opportunities
3. Create bridges and partnerships between colleges and universities
4. Identify and foster “Research Champions”
5. Identify and offer research funding from the professional organizations to support naturopathic research that benefits research capacity.

These immediate priorities were then translated into specific goals and activities over four years (see Table 2).

Year 1

In the first year, it will be important to establish research capacity through research training and infrastructure. Key activities to achieve this goal include providing targeted research training skills workshops for faculty and locally identified “Research Champions.” Further to this, infrastructure-building activities are also needed. These include developing guidelines for the professional associations to provide research funding, building patient-reported outcome measures into the academic clinics of naturopathic programs, and exploring collaborative arrangements between organizations and institutions to facilitate journal database access.

Year 2

The focus in the second year is on strengthening research capacity through funding and external partnerships. This requires establishing a WNF Research Subcommittee for Europe and identifying and connecting with researchers in European universities interested in naturopathy. Building on the Year 1 activities, the WNF

TABLE 2 European Naturopathic Research 4-year strategic plan

| Year | Goals | Activities |
|------|---|---|
| 1 | Establish research capacity through research training and infrastructure | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide research training skills workshop for faculty and local “Research Champions” 2. Develop guidelines for research funding from the profession 3. Build patient-reported outcomes measures into academic clinics 4. Investigate the logistics of journal database access |
| 2 | Strengthen research capacity through funding and external partnerships | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish a WNF Research Subcommittee for Europe 2. Identify and connect with researchers in European universities interested in naturopathy 3. Apply for funding (1 x grant) 4. Establish a pooled funding arrangement among European WNF members |
| 3 | Secure continued research capacity through formalized research training in naturopathic courses | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop research subjects for undergraduate naturopathic clinical courses 2. Develop reciprocal training arrangements for research skills among European educational institutions |
| 4 | Establish research sustainability through university-level naturopathic education | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish a naturopathic university with research training embedded in the curriculum |

WNF: World Naturopathic Federation

European Regional Group will also develop a pooled research fund to support research activities in the region. The existing naturopathic researchers will also collaborate with international naturopathic researchers and non-naturopathic researchers in Europe where appropriate, to apply for funding through an existing grant scheme.

Year 3

The goal for the third year is to secure continued research capacity through formalized naturopathic research training in naturopathic programs. For this to occur, the regional representatives will develop research subjects to include in undergraduate clinical programs and develop reciprocal training arrangements for research skills among educational institutions delivering naturopathic training in Europe.

Year 4

The fourth year aims to establish research sustainability through university-level naturopathic education. For this to occur, the WNF European Regional Group professional and educational members will collaborate to establish a naturopathic university with research training embedded in the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The WNF European Regional Group Research Strategy Meeting represents a first attempt for representatives of the naturopathic profession in the European Region to identify priorities and goals, underpinned by specific activities, to build regional research capacity and activity. While the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the timeline of initiating this strategy, the priorities, goals, and planned activities remain the same for the WNF European Regional Group. The strategy not only reflects a vision

for the future of the profession in Europe, it also reflects an acknowledgement that not only is the European naturopathic community custodian of the historical roots of the global naturopathic profession, it also has an important role to play in its future.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

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

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