

Editorial: Being internationalist: the only way forward for developing the Australian naturopathic profession

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Earlier this year, this journal published a commentary that put forward perspectives of Australian organisations being part of the World Naturopathic Federation and the broader international naturopathic community.¹ However, practitioners often queried the logic – or importance – of focusing attention and resources towards cooperation and collaboration with the international community. Practitioners were not opposed to cooperation per se, and usually their concerns could be categorised in two main ways: practitioners either noted that there are so many problems requiring attention in Australia, that resources and attention should be focused on those; or that Australia has a proud naturopathic tradition, which should not be dictated to by practitioners from overseas. However, such concerns are not borne out by the experience of other Australian professions becoming more ‘internationalist’ in their outlook – international cooperation and collaboration is not mutually exclusive to addressing national priorities, and international diversity tends to be celebrated rather than punished.

Australia is a small country, but it is undoubtedly one that has historically punched well above its weight in the naturopathic world. It is well placed to develop a more internationalist perspective. Australia is considered one of the ‘major mature’ naturopathic jurisdictions – with high numbers of practitioners, high public utilisation and relatively mature professional infrastructure and recognition (many licensed states in North America, for example, still don’t have access to sales tax exemption or the ability to refer patients for pathology tests – something most Australian practitioners take for granted). Well-trained Australian naturopaths are generally respected wherever they go, even in well-regulated jurisdictions with high standards such as the licensed states and provinces of North America, India or South Africa. Australian naturopathic textbooks are used in the curriculum of naturopathic colleges in over a dozen countries on four continents. Australian-trained naturopaths have been instrumental in setting up national naturopathic associations in nations such as Egypt and Hong Kong. Despite this, whilst some informal collaboration between the international naturopathic community and Australian naturopathic individuals, institutions and organisations exist, they remain ad-hoc and have not substantially increased as the naturopathic discipline has professionalised.

The Australian naturopathic profession began in a spirit of internationalism. Indeed, many of the earliest high-profile Australian naturopaths were either immigrants who had brought naturopathy with them from nations such as Germany (such as the first naturopath individually profiled in Australian print – Benno von Konigswerder from Brisbane²) or the United Kingdom (Portsmouth-born Marcus Blackmore being a particularly high-profile example). Some Australian-born practitioners completed their training overseas (such as Frederik Roberts training under Lindlahr and Lust in the United States³). Early Australian naturopathic journals such as *Nature Cure* and *Medical Freedom* and *Nature’s Path to Health* regularly had reports from the naturopathic profession overseas. Naturopathic journals from the 1970s – when intercontinental travel was more convenient and accessible – speak of regular international lecturer exchanges between the United States and Australia.⁴ However, at some point this internationalist view of Australian naturopathic profession stagnated, even as the resources available for international collaboration have improved.

It is important for clinical professions to take on an internationalist view for their own development. Experiences from the field of medicine has shown that international collaboration improves clinical practice and patient outcomes.^{5,6} The experience of other professions – perhaps best documented by the chiropractic profession⁷ – also suggests that working with international professional collaborators fuels professional growth and breaks down barriers to professional advancement. Rather than reduce resources, international collaboration offers insights, experiences and, in some cases, actual resources from naturopathic professionals who have undergone similar challenges. International collaboration presents a unified voice, whilst also respecting that individual countries may have their own norms and values. The Review of the Australian Government Rebate on Private Health Insurance for Natural Therapies (the Review)⁸ is an obvious example of why this broader international perspective is important in this respect. A full critique of the Review has been published elsewhere⁹, but the Review’s findings and recommendations with respect to the naturopathic profession were highly related to the failure of the Australian profession to engage on an international level. The review did note that there

was evidence of effectiveness for naturopathic practice in several chronic conditions, but stated that the lack of regulation in the Australian profession meant that evidence from regulated countries could not be transferred to the Australian setting. However, the World Naturopathic Federation does recognise that degree-trained naturopaths are largely equivalent in training and scope to naturopaths in the jurisdiction in which most studies were conducted¹⁰, and scholarly examination has suggested that although heterogeneity exists, the highest level of naturopathic training in Australia is roughly equivalent to that presented in those research studies.¹¹ However, while the results of scholarly studies do indicate such transferability, this has not been borne out in practice. Professions such as medicine, nursing, chiropractic or pharmacy are not subject to similar claims because there is strong, practical evidence of active international collaboration by those professions, not merely a few comments hidden in scholarly journals.

Access to the international community can also help the Australian naturopathic community face other challenges in education and practice. The crude re-definition of Australian naturopathy as “naturopathy = herbal medicine + nutrition + either homeopathy or massage” has had tragic consequences for the scope of the naturopathic profession.¹² Not only has it encouraged a prescription-focused mentality in contemporary Australian naturopathy, it has also removed clinically valuable (and once-popular) naturopathic modalities such as hydrotherapy (or naturopathic physical medicine more broadly) from the Australian curriculum.¹³ Yet this development was uniquely Australian, driven not by the needs of the naturopathic profession but by college owners who truncated naturopathic training to fit within the vocational education model, to ensure their colleges would be eligible for Austudy payments to maintain student numbers. If Australia is to reintroduce these ‘lost’ modalities into naturopathic training, it is going to be necessary to draw on the international naturopathic community. However, naturopaths in other nations can learn much from the Australian training in herbal medicine and nutrition, which surpass the level taught elsewhere. Every national naturopathic community is strong in some areas but weak in others. The Indian profession is unsurpassed in nature cure and hydrotherapy, the North American profession in primary care, the British in naturopathic physical medicine and the Australian profession in herbal medicine. By ignoring each other the international profession is unable to share its strengths, and will continue to be plagued by its individual weaknesses.

Whilst Australian naturopaths will always have their own nation-specific issues, acting on these and developing an internationalist perspective is not mutually exclusive. Nor is such a perspective likely to fix every naturopathic problem in Australia. For example, internal divisions have occurred for as long as the naturopathic

profession has existed. A frustrated editorial in *The Australian Naturopath* lamented on the damage internal squabbling between national associations had done to the development of the Australian naturopathic profession over its first 50 years.¹⁴ Sadly, such professional fragmentation and division continues to frustrate Australian naturopathic practitioners some 50 years later.¹⁵ This is, clearly, something that can only be fixed internally; however, developing a broader international outlook is essential to growing the naturopathic profession not only in Australia, but also internationally. Australian membership in the World Naturopathic Federation is a start, but what is needed is a cultural shift in the profession, to step back and take an expansive view of the challenges, opportunities and perspectives of the global profession, and identify what local part it can play in moving the profession forward.

Who knows, perhaps opening up the spirit of collegiality and collaboration to work more closely with our international colleagues may even help us resolve some of our differences back home.

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