

POLICY DOCUMENT

COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

AWARENESS IN MEDICAL EDUCATION

Background

Complementary and Alternative medicine (CAM) use in Australia is popular. An Australian population-based survey published in 2005 estimated that in the previous 12 months, 68.9% of the population had used a CAM and 44.1% of the population had had visited a CAM practitioner. It has been estimated that \$4.13 billion is being spent on CAM¹ every year. In addition to the widespread use of CAMs in Australia, a 2002 paper by Shenfield et al found that 47% of CAM users fail to inform their doctor that they are using a CAM². Several reasons have been proposed as to why patients neglect to disclose CAM use to their doctors, including fear of ridicule, failure of doctors to ask their patients directly, and the assumption that their doctors would not be interested.³ A lack of awareness of CAM therapies by doctors may also contribute to this lack of disclosure.

In a report entitled *Complementary Medicines in the Australian Health System*, published in 2003 by the Australian Government, an expert committee acknowledges the wide-spread use of CAMs in Australia, and the need for a greater awareness of CAM therapies by medical practitioners.

Quoting the report, page 124 reads:

"The Australian Medical Association acknowledges the increasing use of complementary medicine by patients and medical practitioners, and has emphasised the need for medical practitioners to obtain a basic understanding of complementary medicines through undergraduate, vocational and continuing education. It believes that medical practitioners need to be informed about complementary medicines and that information sources, similar to those for mainstream medicines, should be developed for use by medical practitioners. This would assist in informing medical practitioners and enable medical practitioners to provide advice to patients."⁴

At present the medical curriculum of most Australian Universities does not facilitate adequate opportunities for medical students to gain an appropriate awareness of CAMs.

Position Statement

AMSA supports the education of CAMs in medical programs across Australia insofar as it is important for students to understand commonly used CAM practices to ensure a holistic approach to patient management and wellbeing.

Policy

AMSA believes that:

1. Evidence-based methodology should be the cornerstone of medical practice.
 - a. CAM education should include the scientific and evidence basis for CAMs.
2. Many CAM practices are not evidence-based
3. The purposes of CAM education should be:
 - a. To distinguish between appropriate and potentially harmful CAM practices, to allow students to guide patients safely in their management
 - b. To ensure understanding of the integration and interaction between conventional medicine and CAMs
4. Medical education in Australia should incorporate an awareness of the philosophies and practices behind the most frequently used Complementary and Alternative Medicines in Australia
5. CAM education may be incorporated with the view to facilitate greater discussion between patient and doctor regarding the appropriate use of CAMs
6. CAM education for medical students will provide an awareness of the types of treatments many patients are using, with a view to ensuring patients are receiving appropriate medical care and minimising the risk of potentially harmful interactions, for instance between herbal medicines and conventional treatments
7. CAM awareness should be taught by people with appropriate knowledge of and experience with CAMs with the view to providing a greater awareness of the philosophies and practices of CAM

References

1. Xue CCL, Zhang AL, Lin V, Da Costa C, Story DF. Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use in Australia: A National Population-Based Survey. *J Altern Complement Med* 2007;13(6):643-50.
2. Shenfield G, Lim E, Allen H. Survey of the use of complementary medicines and therapies in children with asthma. *J Paediatrics and Child Health* 2002;38:252-7
3. Slader CA, Reddel HK, Jenkins CR, Armour CL, Bosnic-Anticevich SZ. Complementary and alternative medicine use in asthma: Who is using what? *Respirology* 2006;11:373-87.
4. Expert Committee on Complementary Medicines In the Health System. *Medicines in the Health System Complementary Medicines in the Australian Health System*. <http://www.tga.gov.au/docs/pdf/cmreport.pdf>. Sept 2003

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