Policy Document

Complementary and Alternative Medicine Awareness in Medical Education Policy

Background

The Australian Medical Students’ Association (AMSA) is the peak representative body of Australia’s medical students. AMSA believes that medical education should encompass a number of issues to produce well rounded and knowledgeable medical students. This includes knowledge about Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) and its role in evidence based practice with a view for harm minimisation and holistic patient care.

Adapted from the Australian Medical Association’s (AMA) position statement, CAM is defined as a wide range of products and treatments with therapeutic claims that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine. Such medicines include, but are not limited to: herbal medicines, some vitamin and mineral supplements, other nutritional supplements, homeopathic formulations, and traditional medicines such as ayurvedic medicines and traditional Chinese medicines. Complementary therapies include acupuncture, chiropractic, osteopathy, naturopathy and meditation. Complementary medicine refers to both medicines and therapies [1].

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 visited a CAM practitioner [2]. A more recent study has shown that people with chronic health conditions, especially mental health conditions are more likely to use CAM [3]. The same study also notes that policy interventions such as regulation may have positive effects on CAM use by the public and interestingly, CAM with statutory regulation in Australia appear to correlate with practitioners which have a higher level of education [4]. A 2002 paper by Shenfield et al found that 47% of CAM users fail to inform their doctor that they are using a CAM [5]. 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 [6]. 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 CAM in Australia, and the need for a greater awareness of CAM therapies by medical practitioners [7]. Following this, the Australian Medical Association developed their position statement regarding Complementary medicines.
Quoting the position statement, point 4.1 reads:

“Medical practitioners should have access to education about complementary medicine in their undergraduate, vocational and further education to provide advice to patients. They should be informed of the level of scientific evidence for both benefits and adverse reactions, including potential interactions with other medicines. [1]

At present it is not known to what extent CAM is covered in the medical curriculum of most Australian Universities but there is no guideline as to how CAM education should be approached. This position statement aims to provide a guideline as to what should be included in CAM education.

Position Statement

AMSA supports the evidence-based education of CAM by qualified clinicians 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;
2. Medical education in Australia should incorporate an awareness of the underlying principles and practices behind the most frequently used Complementary and Alternative Medicines in Australia;
3. CAM education may be incorporated with the view to facilitate greater discussion between patient and doctor regarding the appropriate use of CAM;
4. The purposes of CAM education should be:
   a. To emphasise the provision of appropriate, non-judgemental medical care;
   b. To equip students with sufficient knowledge of CAM to be able to analyse and evaluate individual therapies on their scientific merits;
   c. To provide an awareness of the types of treatments many patients are using;
   d. To distinguish between appropriate and potentially harmful CAM practices; which will allow students to guide patients safely and accurately in their use of CAM;
   e. Educate for harm minimisation e.g. teaching about potentially harmful interactions with concurrent usage of enzyme inducing herbs such as St John’s Wort [8];
   f. To ensure understanding of the interaction between conventional medicine and CAM in the delivery of holistic and integrated healthcare;
5. CAM education should be taught by:
   a. Health practitioners who have knowledge and experience of utilising CAM in practice, and who teach within an evidence based framework with a view to provide better awareness about CAM.
References


Policy Details

Name: Complementary and Alternative Medicine Awareness in Medical Education Policy

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Amended following review, First Council, 2014

The previous version of the policy was repealed, and updated version adopted.