

Media Release

Health Minister Blunders in Decision Affecting Natural Medicine

Despite new evidence and an intense public backlash, Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt, remains silent on a decision to axe Government Private Health Insurance subsidies for natural therapies. The policy, which comes into effect from April 1st, also prohibits Private Health Insurers from independently offering rebates for these services under general extras cover.

The justification for this decision rests on a 2015 review conducted by the National Health & Medical Research Council (NHMRC) for the Department of Health (DoH) which alleges 'no conclusive evidence' could be found for 16 popular therapies including Naturopathy, Herbal Medicine, Pilates and Yoga.

Health Australia Party National President Professor Kerry Bone said the review was deeply flawed. "Under the interpretations and restrictive inclusion criteria used in the study, few if any therapies would show evidence of effectiveness, including general practice itself." He said.

The purpose of the review was to defend planned budget cuts for natural therapy subsidies. "The very narrow conditions imposed on the review might appear to some to be a deliberate strategy to avoid finding evidence, so that a predetermined outcome could be justified" said Professor Bone.

According to Professor Stephen Myers, Researcher at Southern Cross University, "The major failing of the review was not to take into account the evidence for the tools of the trade of naturopaths (nutritional approaches and supplements, herbal medicine and lifestyle interventions). Yet, medicine accepts that evidence for drugs and surgery automatically add to the evidence of its effectiveness. Medicine as a discipline would consider such a limited assessment of its practice to be outrageous".

While the NHMRC/DoH allege no evidence demonstrating the benefits of Naturopathy could be found using their restrictive terms of reference, new research¹ published just days ago by Professor Myers and Vanessa Vigar clearly identified 33 published studies involving 9,859 participants. This clinical research showed Naturopathic medicine was in fact effective for a wide range of chronic conditions including cardiovascular disorders, musculoskeletal pain, type 2 diabetes, PCOS, depression, anxiety, chronic pain, hepatitis C, menopausal symptoms, bipolar disorder, asthma and in increasing cancer survival time.

In light of this strong evidence, the decision to cut rebates "urgently needs to be reconsidered" said Professor Myers.

A Complaint alleging procedural and scientific misconduct relating to the first of the natural therapy reviews conducted by the NHMRC has been referred to the Commonwealth Ombudsman for investigation, with a determination expected soon.

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Sources ¹ - <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/acm.2018.0340>