Reviewer's report

Title: Current Challenges and Future Directions for Naturopathic Medicine in Australia: A Qualitative Examination of Perceptions and Experiences from Grassroots Practice

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Reviewer: Carlo Calabrese

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This is an important variety of study in the field of naturopathy in Australia where the profession generally seeks greater integration in the health care system. Despite the fact the investigation is very preliminary and its local convenience sample limits generalizability, the issues raised have high relevance for the naturopathic profession in Australia and other countries, including the US and Canada.

One weakness of the report, an issue which is recursively reflected in the comments of the interviewees, is the lack of definition in what the practice of naturopathy constitutes. The authors provide no references to any specific authoritative body or publication as to their sample tenets of the profession (“Tolle causum” and “Vis medicatrix naturae”). Beyond the two phrases, the authors do not cite details on what distinguishes naturopathic practice from other forms of health care despite that interviewees are threatened by the possible “devaluation of naturopathic philosophy.” The interviewees cite the potential loss of the “art” of practice, of requisite “individualization” of treatment, and perhaps of a holistic perspective on the patient to the increasing pressure for evidence-based medicine which they generally equate with commercially-driven, mechanistically-rationalized, population-based outcomes of single therapeutic agents.

There is no defense of “individualization” or a holistic perspective as specifically naturopathic, just as the profession’s tenets are not defended (or defensible?) as specifically naturopathic. The vaguely looming naturopathic “art” of practice, which is also unexplored here, may hold unique benefits of the practice from which all health care providers may learn and of which potential patients should be made more aware.

Though analysis of the data points to a dismissal of single agent research as inadequate to the naturopathic evidence base, the report offers no interview data that expresses what kind of evidence would be acceptable in a valid naturopathic epistemology. The lack of definition and an acceptable epistemology make it extremely difficult to differentiate “bogus” unqualified practitioners from the bona fide.

The data from this small study remains available and might be re-analyzed to
focus on the twin fundamental gaps of naturopathic definition and appropriate evidentiary tools which are the necessary foundations of process and outcome standards for the future development of the profession. In the absence of these core functions, it is no wonder that practitioners look to external regulation to help them define their roles in a national health care system. The authors indicate that the effort for regulation “may be representative of deeper frustrations and disconnections with leadership amongst professional associations” and--this reviewer might emphasize--its academic institutions.

The article is part of a growing self-examination in the profession and perhaps an impetus to the need for definitional clarity and the increasingly normal health care system functions of guideline development, practice improvement processes and outcomes accountability.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare I have not competing interests.