

Choosing a complementary medicine practitioner

Selecting a complementary medicine (CM) healthcare practitioner is an important decision and is essential to ensure that you receive the best possible advice and care. CM may be practised by conventional healthcare practitioners with additional training such as medical doctors, registered nurses and physiotherapists as well as by other practitioners with relevant CM qualifications and experience. Some CM professions are unregulated by the government so practitioners have limited legal requirements to reach a particular standard of training. In these instances, being a member of a professional association provides some assurance that they have attained a certain level of training. However, if a CM practitioner has not undergone formal training and is not a member of a professional association, there is no assurance they have the necessary skills to provide the best possible advice and care.

The National Institute of Complementary Medicine (NICM) has developed a number of Fact Sheets to assist you in your decision making about CM. They provide general information about CM, answers to frequently asked questions, issues to consider, and sources for further information.

Take charge of your health by being an informed consumer. If you are unsure about any answers or uncomfortable with your understanding of some of the issues, you should talk to a healthcare professional, such as your doctor, pharmacist, community health nurse or complementary healthcare practitioner.

What is complementary medicine?

CM encompasses a diverse range of therapies and health products that aim to prevent, treat or manage illness. Some CM therapies offer a complete system of diagnosis and treatment, while others complement conventional medical practices with supportive therapy.

CM includes the principal CM disciplines such as acupuncture, chiropractic, herbal medicine, homeopathy, naturopathy and osteopathy. It also includes long-established and traditional

systems of healthcare such as Ayurvedic medicine and traditional Chinese medicine and therapies which are most often used to complement conventional medicine such as manipulative and mind-body practices including acupuncture, massage, counselling, hypnotherapy and meditation. There are many more CM therapies such as Bach and other flower remedies, crystal therapy and radionics.

Matters to consider before choosing a complementary medicine practitioner

- What benefits do I hope to achieve with CM?
- Which CM approach is suitable and feasible for me?
- What is the evidence that supports the quality, safety and effectiveness of this CM?
- What are the risks associated with using this CM therapy?
- Should I get more information from a CM practitioner who has expertise in this area of CM?

To help find answers to the above questions you should gather reliable information on the CM therapy that interests you. Reliable, up-to-date information is crucial, particularly when it comes to making decisions about your health. The internet is a major source of health information. While it provides access to a massive amount of useful information, it also can lead users to information of questionable quality (to find help in evaluating the reliability of internet resources see *Choosing Complementary Medicine Fact Sheet*). If you are unable to directly access the internet, you may be able to gain access through a service provider such as a library. Alternatively, ask your local library if they can help you locate books and articles on the therapy that interests you.

A good place to start searching for information on the internet is the Australian Government's site – *HealthInsite* (www.healthinsite.gov.au). It is a single entry point to quality information from leading health information providers, including peak health organisations, government agencies and educational and research institutions.

Talk to your healthcare professionals about options

It is always a good idea to discuss any health options you are considering with all your health professionals such as your doctor, pharmacist, community health nurse and CM practitioner. This is important so that your care can be co-ordinated, to avoid safety issues such as drug interactions and to encourage communication between your healthcare providers.

Your doctor or other healthcare professional may be able to give you a referral to a CM practitioner or a hospital with a CM service. Some medical practices may have a CM practitioner on staff. Professional CM associations can also provide useful information about their profession and suitable CM practitioners in your area.

Regulation and professional accreditation of CM practitioners in Australia

The principal purpose of regulating any healthcare profession is to protect the public from unqualified or inadequately trained practitioners. Effective regulation allows consumers to seek practitioners with confidence, knowing they will get appropriate treatment from a well trained practitioner in an environment where their rights are protected. It also encourages other healthcare professionals to have confidence in a therapy's practitioners.

In both conventional medicine and CM, governments and professional organisations have roles in determining professional standards and the delivery of health services. In July 2010, a National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for health practitioners was established. The National Scheme will initially apply to ten health disciplines - medical, nursing and midwifery, pharmacy, physiotherapy, dental, psychology, optometry, osteopathy, chiropractic and podiatry. From 1 July 2012 the practice of Chinese medicine will be included.

Apart from chiropractors and osteopaths and, from 1 July 2012, Chinese medicine practitioners, there is no standardised national system for regulating other CM practitioners. The extent and type of regulation varies from state to state and from one CM profession to another. Most CM disciplines are unregulated although practitioners are subject to a range of Commonwealth and state legislation including the prescribing of medicines, health complaints, infectious diseases, the supply of services free of goods and services charges, etc.

Complementary medicine professional associations

Professional membership of CM organisations may offer confidence in the qualifications and skills of practitioners.

Most professional associations offer some form of certification to their members, based on criteria established by the individual organisation. This may include appropriate standards of education and training for membership, requirements for continuing professional education, a code of ethics, procedures for receiving, investigating and resolving consumer complaints, a disciplinary system for enforcing conduct and a process for external scrutiny. Details of the criteria for membership and on-going certification can be sought from individual organisations. Even within some therapeutic disciplines there may be several professional bodies, each with their own criteria, representing therapists in the same discipline.

At present there are numerous professional bodies representing CM practitioners and some disciplines are represented by several organisations. The standards for certification or registration can vary widely between professional bodies. CM practitioners may operate within voluntary professional registers or work independent of registration.

When searching for a CM practitioner, many professional associations provide referrals to their members as well as information on specific therapies and their standards for membership. These organisations can be located via the internet or telephone directories. Ask at a library for assistance. Check their standards against the criteria detailed below.

Even if a friend recommends a CM practitioner, or if you have found a practitioner through a business directory or other advertisement, looking into their professional affiliations may help you decide on a particular therapist.

Choosing a practitioner

Feel free to contact the practitioners you are considering to obtain more information. Although you can do this over the telephone, some practitioners may also have an internet site or brochure. Before you make contact, think about what factors are important to you.

You might wish to have more information about:

- the practitioner's professional qualifications and professional affiliations. Understanding the criteria for professional membership may also be helpful
- the practitioner's experience in treating patients with problems similar to yours
- his or her approach to care and the treatments they use
- costs of treatments including insurance reimbursement (see below)
- what to expect during the first visit or assessment.

Evaluating the practitioner and practice

After making your first visit:

- think about how comfortable you felt during your conversations with the practitioner and their staff
- review the information they provided
- did the experience measure up in terms of what is important to you?

Building a relationship with a new practitioner takes time. Nevertheless, if at any time you are not satisfied or comfortable, you should discuss your concerns with the practitioner and feel free to stop treatment or look for a different practitioner. Before deciding to stop treatment, however, ask if it is safe to do so. If you do stop treatment, tell your other healthcare providers so they can continue to make fully informed decisions about your care.

Will insurance cover the cost of a CM practitioner?

A number of CM therapies are covered by private health insurance, but the amount of coverage offered varies depending on the insurer and the therapy given. In addition, the health fund may only recognise certain CM practitioners. Check first to see if the therapy is covered, if your practitioner is part of your health fund's network, and what proportion of the costs will be reimbursed. Even with insurance, you may be responsible for a percentage of the cost of therapy as well as for any products such as vitamin supplements or herbal medicines.

Using complementary medicine safely

As with all medical treatments, there are risks associated with CM therapies and products. These risks depend on the specific therapy used, your general health, other treatments being used and the reasons for using the CM therapy.

Risks can relate to direct effects of treatment or indirect actions such as failing to give adequate advice or refer to another healthcare provider when appropriate. Risks might also arise when practitioners have inadequate skills or knowledge or are unaware of the limits of their practice. Such risks may result in misdiagnosis, failure to refer, failure to explain precautions, interactions with medications, inappropriate compounding and dispensing of herbal and other medicines.

To reduce the risks and maximise the benefits, ensure you do your homework first. Once you start CM treatment, tell all of your healthcare providers about any CM practices and products that you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure your care is coordinated and safe.

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