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Submitted to **Consultation Paper for the National Preventive Health Strategy**  
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## Development of the National Preventive Health Strategy

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**Organisation:**

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## Vision and Aims of the Strategy

### 4 Are the vision and aims appropriate for the next 10 years? Why or why not?

**Vision and aims :**

The overall vision and aims are appropriate for the next 10 years. There is a substantial amount of work to be done in the Australian context to fulfill this vision. As acknowledged in the Strategy, the Australian health system is currently illness-focussed and a new emphasis on preventive health is welcomed by the Australian Naturopathic Council (ANC). We support all four aims as outlined, and provide further detailed comment on two specific aims to ensure the Strategy is broad and reflects the needs and preferences of the Australian population:

1. Australians have the best start in life.

We agree that the intervention in early life is critical to ensure optimal health of the population throughout all life stages. However, we believe that focusing on preventing infectious disease and injury in childhood is too narrow in focus. The naturopathic profession in Australia places a high priority on fertility and periconception support (1), to provide both short and long term benefits to mother, father and baby. While comprehensive preconception services in Australia are limited and many primary care health professionals do not feel confident in providing preconception counselling, (2,3) basic science, clinical and epidemiological research confirms that periconception period is critical to life course health for couples and their children (2). Naturopaths have particular expertise in this area, which may explain why women planning a pregnancy are 1.8 times more likely to consult with a naturopath than women not planning a pregnancy (3). With this in mind, the ANC argues that periconceptional counselling and support warrants explicit mention in the Aims and careful attention during the implementation of the strategy.

2. Australians live as long as possible in good health

The ANC is in strong agreement with this aim. Over 80% of the patients visiting a naturopath in Australia report having a chronic illness (4). Australians who visit a naturopath do so because they experience their naturopath as helpful and supportive and find that naturopathic care gives them a sense of control over their health. Clinical research also suggests naturopathic care may contribute positive health benefits to individuals with a range of chronic health conditions including national health priority areas such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and mental illness (5). Internationally, the vast majority of naturopaths actively engage in health promotion activities (6). Furthermore, the Australian naturopathic profession commonly discusses important preventive health topics with their patients such as diet and nutrition, sleep, stress management, and physical activity and fitness. Naturopaths also provide care to patients across all life stages. As such, the ANC is deeply committed to seeing this aim fulfilled.

**References:**

(1) Steel A, Schloss J, Leach M, Adams J. The naturopathic profession in Australia: A secondary analysis of the Practitioner Research and Collaboration Initiative (PRACI). *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*. 2020 Aug 1;40:101220.

(2) Steel A, Lucke J, Reid R, Adams J. A systematic review of women's and health professional's attitudes and experience of preconception care service delivery. *Fam Pract*. 2016;33(6):588-95.

(3) Hammarberg K, Taylor L. Survey of Maternal, Child and Family Health Nurses' attitudes and practice relating to preconception health promotion. *Australian journal of primary health*. 2019;25(1):43-8.

(4) Suzuki K. The developing world of DOHaD. *Journal of Developmental Origins of Health and Disease*. 2018;9(3):266-9.

(5) Steel A, Adams J, Sibbritt D. The Characteristics of Women Who Use Complementary Medicine While Attempting to Conceive: Results from a Nationally Representative Sample of 13,224 Australian Women. *Women's Health Issues*. 2017;27(1):67-74.

(6) Foley H, Steel A, Adams J. Consultation with complementary medicine practitioners by individuals with chronic conditions: Characteristics and reasons for consultation in Australian clinical settings. *Health & social care in the community*. 2020 Jun 19.

## Goals of the Strategy

### 5 Are these the right goals to achieve the vision and aims of the Strategy. Why or why not? Is anything missing?

## **Goals :**

We suggest that while these goals have the potential to effectively achieve the vision and aims of the Strategy, it is crucial that its implementation draws on all valuable resources within the health system. We draw particular attention to several goals below.

Prevention will be embedded in the health system:

We particularly applaud the goal "Prevention will be embedded in the health system" which includes reference to make the most of every opportunity to support prevention in our primary, community and acute care settings. Harnessing the vast skill set of naturopaths as part of this strategy should be part of this focus and investment in illness prevention.

Approximately 6.2% of Australians have consulted with a naturopath in the previous 12 months, and half of naturopathic patients visit their naturopath for most of their health issues and 59.6% use their naturopath as their primary provider; with 22.2% as their sole primary care provider and 37.1% as the primary provider in conjunction with other health providers (e.g. GPs) used in a secondary capacity (7). While naturopaths are already embedded in the health system and accessed by the community for acute and chronic health complaints, their full value for health prevention can not be realised without being incorporated into a coordinated plan across all health services.

Individuals will be enabled to make the best possible decisions about their health:

A core element of the 4-year bachelor's degree required of naturopaths in Australia is in-depth training in diet and lifestyle prescription and counselling to improve overall health and wellbeing. Naturopaths are highly skilled at patient education which, as a core principle of Naturopathic practice, aims to improve health literacy and self-responsibility.

It is important that the naturopathic profession is involved in the Strategy's implementation and in achieving the Strategy's aims. Naturopaths provide important access to the wider population and fulfils the spirit of the proposed strategy: by enabling individuals to make the best possible health decisions through options, knowledge and skills; and opening up new opportunities for greater health gains.

Individuals who consult with a naturopath reported they: knew what to do to take care of their health problem; had techniques they could use when their symptoms got worse; and that their naturopath teaches them ways to relieve symptoms themselves more frequently than they reported for their medical doctor (8). They also reported a higher score for 'patient activation' - or being empowered to take actions themselves - for their naturopath than for their medical doctor (8). This research is supported by unpublished research conducted by the World Naturopathic Federation which found that, internationally, naturopaths are commonly providing information sheets and handouts to patients in their clinics, sharing health-related information through social and professional networks, and giving information talks to the community (9). Combined, these studies emphasise the active role naturopaths play in community and patient education and empowerment, and the unrecognised contribution they may already make to preventive health.

Prevention efforts will be adapted to emerging issues and new science:

We strongly encourage the consideration of, and adaptation to, emerging issues and new science. The evidence-base supporting naturopathic care in the prevention and treatment of health conditions is constantly evolving and we urge those responsible for implementing the strategy to remain abreast of this evidence. Similarly, naturopathic practitioners have been characterised as early adopters of new health-related evidence and practices, and as such can be a valuable asset in catalysing the change required to transform the health system from its current illness-focus to place a higher priority on wellness and prevention (10).

## **References:**

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- (8) Foley H, Steel A, Adams J. Perceptions of person-centred care amongst individuals with chronic conditions who consult complementary medicine practitioners. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*. 2020 Aug 1;52:102518.
- (9) Steel A, Lloyd I. Community education and health promotion activities of naturopathic practitioners: results of an international cross-sectional survey. Not published - available on request.
- (10) Bradley R, Harnett J, Cooley K, McIntyre E, Goldenberg J, Adams J. Naturopathy as a Model of Prevention-Oriented, Patient-Centered Primary Care: A Disruptive Innovation in Health Care. *Medicina*. 2019 Sep;55(9):603.

## **Mobilising a Prevention System**

### **6 Are these the right actions to mobilise a prevention system?**

#### **Enablers :**

We agree with these proposed actions to mobilise a prevention system, and would like to emphasise the importance of health system action to reorient existing health services to include prevention in routine health service delivery. As stated previously, many Australians consult with naturopaths as a source of primary health care and as such the health system action should also consider the contribution of naturopaths to optimise preventive health service delivery.

Information and literacy skills are also an important enabler for preventive health and naturopaths are skilled at facilitating improved health literacy in the community. In addition to the naturopath-led activities mentioned earlier, the national and global naturopathic profession is also actively involved in community education, as evidenced by this information video recently commissioned by the World Naturopathic Federation which showcased simple lifestyle, and dietary advice for disease prevention: <https://youtu.be/l0gKAfpWF2g>

We also agree that there is a need for research and evaluation, particularly as it relates to improved translation of evidence between research and policy. The naturopathic profession in Australia has a strong and active research community and the Australian Naturopathic Council invites partnership with other stakeholders to better understand the research evidence underpinning naturopathic practice in preventive health.

## **Boosting Action in Focus Areas**

## 7 Where should efforts be prioritised for the focus areas?

### Boosting Actions:

The Australian Naturopathic Council recommends that efforts prioritise the following focus areas:

- 1) Improving consumption of a healthy diet
- 2) Increasing physical activity

One of the key aspects of naturopathic training and practice involves advising patients on healthy diet and lifestyle changes. This encompasses healthy eating as well as physical activity. We believe these are the foundations of any preventive health strategy. Especially physical activity - which is shown to lower the risk of many cancers, as well as the use of alcohol, drugs and tobacco (11). The focus on improving healthy diet and increasing physical exercise could be targeted across different life stages: for a pregnant woman, the critical years in utero; early childhood; school age children; adolescence (which is an at-risk life stage in regard to hazardous behaviours); healthy workplaces; hospitals; and aged care environments. This would play a significant role in preventing disease across all stages of life.

### References:

- (11) Pearson R, Turner LW, Young ME, Knickerbocker C. Correlates of health eating and physical activity among students in Grades 6-12. *American Journal of Health Studies*. 2007 Sep 1;22(3).
- (12) Baird J, Jacob C, Barker M, Fall CH, Hanson M, Harvey NC, Inskip HM, Kumaran K, Cooper C. Developmental origins of health and disease: a life course approach to the prevention of non-communicable diseases. In *Healthcare* 2017 Mar (Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 14). Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute.

## Continuing Strong Foundations

### 8 How do we enhance current prevention action?

#### Continuing Strong Foundations:

It is the position of the Australian Naturopathic Council that the intended National Prevention Health Strategy, which will address the 3rd pillar of the Long Term National Health Plan, should also be able to provide explicit scope for considering not only new treatments, but also the contribution of all health professionals serving the community. With this in mind, the best way to enhance current prevention action is to consider all preventive health services provided to the community and draw on their strengths and optimise the associated opportunities. To date the potential role and important resource of the naturopathic profession, which represents a significant component of the Australian healthcare workforce (13) has been overlooked. Due to the naturopathic professions' strong commitment and action with regards to preventive health, any sustained activity in a prevention system should consider how to capitalise on the values, skills, knowledge and expertise of naturopaths in Australia.

### References:

- (13) McIntyre E, Adams J, Foley H, Harnett J, Leach MJ, Reid R, Schloss J, Steel A. Consultations with naturopaths and Western herbalists: Prevalence of use and characteristics of users in Australia. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. 2019 Feb 1;25(2):181-8.

## Additional feedback/comments

### 9 Any additional feedback/comments?

#### Additional feedback:

The intention for a more holistic strategic focus on wellbeing needs to reflect an equitable consideration of prevailing cultural and individual healthcare needs and choices and be responsive to health seeking behaviour in the community.

The guiding principles of naturopathic practice include illness prevention, person-centred healthcare, and health promotion throughout all life-stages. The treatments employed by naturopathic practitioners commonly include encouraging healthy lifestyle choices and providing nutritional/dietary prescription. For this reason, the naturopathic profession needs to be considered in the implementation of the Strategy and will ensure that all available resources are applied to achieve the Strategy Vision and Aims.