

AMT Media Release

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Department of Health releases final Natural Therapies Review

On November 16, the Federal Health Department publicly released the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) review of the evidence for the effectiveness of 17 natural therapies, including massage therapy.

The Association of Massage Therapists is concerned by media reports stating that all the therapies under review were found to be ineffective. In fact, the review found positive effects in several therapies, with evidence that massage therapy can provide immediate term relief for chronic and acute low back pain and for promoting weight gain in pre-term infants.

The NHMRC reviewers acknowledged the limitations in drawing definite conclusions about the efficacy of the therapies under investigation, not only due to a lack of studies for some clinical conditions but also due to the lack of information reported in the systematic reviews.

AMT Secretary, Rebecca Barnett, is particularly concerned about how the NHRMC findings have been reported given the narrow brief of the review.

"The NHMRC's brief was to look for systematic reviews over a five-year period, which is a relatively narrow scope for the study. The findings clearly underscore the urgent need for high quality research but we need to keep a clear head about the distinction between unproven therapy and ineffective therapy," Ms Barnett said.

The review acknowledges that more rigorous, multicentre and well-designed clinical studies assessing the effectiveness of massage therapy for a particular patient population are required to allow firm and conclusive statements about its effectiveness. It also acknowledges that, in normal 'real world' practice conditions, massage therapists often combine various treatment modalities and techniques within a single session, and may also treat patients over longer periods of time than those assessed under randomised controlled trial conditions.

"The NHMRC review of massage therapy basically underscores some of the self-limiting factors involved in trying to test complex interventions like massage therapy under clinically controlled conditions," Ms Barnett said. "Even the best-designed clinical trials of massage therapy don't rate well under the standard methodological scales used in systematic reviews, partly because it is impossible to blind patients or practitioners to the therapy. Also, the labour-intensive nature of massage doesn't lend itself to large-scale studies with thousands of patients. Most controlled trials of massage therapy involve less than 30 subjects and are therefore considered to be statistically underpowered."

AMT President, Annette Cassar, said that massage therapy will continue to play an important role in the broader Australian healthcare system.

"Massage therapists are uniquely placed to provide highly individualised, patient-centred care, filling a care gap in a way that busy medical practitioners often can't due to time constraints," Ms Cassar said. "We hope to see the Australian Government investing in quality research with pragmatic study designs that more closely reflect the real-world conditions under which massage therapists practice."



in good hands

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