Australian trends in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) are similar to those in other Western countries, such as the USA, Britain, and Canada. These trends include (1) increased consumer demand for CAM; (2) increasing provision of CAM by orthodox medical practitioners; (3) government regulation of CAMs and practitioners; (4) increased tertiary education in CAM; and (5) moves towards a stronger scientific research base for CAM. Also as in other Western countries, the term CAM covers both products and therapies — products such as vitamins, minerals, and herbs based on naturally occurring substances, and therapies such as chiropractic, acupuncture, naturopathy, homeopathy, and aromatherapy.  

**CONSUMER DEMAND FOR CAM**

It has been estimated that over 60 percent of Australians resort to CAM, that one in two Australians use at least one non-medically prescribed CAM, and that one in five Australians visit at least one CAM practitioner a year. Currently researchers estimate that Australians are spending A$2 billion (US$1.2 billion) annually on CAM, with about two-thirds of that amount for complementary medicines and one third for practitioners. The reasons for this exponential growth of CAM in Australia and other Western countries are poorly understood. A review of studies on Australian use of CAM found that people resort to CAM for various reasons, including the failure of conventional biomedical treatment to alleviate symptoms or cure disease and an increasing attraction to holistic health prevention, whereby health is viewed along the mind-body-spirit continuum.  

Prevention and self-help strategies are more compatible with the holistic health model that informs CAM than with the biomedical model, which relies on disease management rather than prevention. Moreover, Australians are increasingly prepared to assume responsibility for their own health, the Government estimating that consumers manage about 75 percent of their own health problems without recourse to professional help. Demographically, the most prominent CAM users in Australia are middle-class, educated women. Australian consumer interest in CAMs is often attributed to its aging population, improved lifestyle and an increase in chronic diseases that seem unresponsive to biomedicine. Moreover, with the advent of the Internet and the proliferation of consumer advocacy groups — for example, the Australian Complementary Health Association (ACHA) — Australians are confronted with a welter of health choices that prominently include CAM.  

The increasing popularity of CAM among Australians has also been associated with the effects of globalization.
In Western countries, the “small planet syndrome” has enhanced ecological awareness as well as appreciation of non-Western cultures, including their traditional, “eco-friendly” health practices, which eschew synthetic pharmaceuticals and invasive surgery. Moreover, through economic globalization, the market is promoting and selling CAM to Australian consumers.

Internationally, the market in complementary medical products is growing at a rate of more than 15 percent each year. Surveys indicate that Australians now spend more on complementary medicines than on pharmaceuticals.

**POLICY RESPONSES FROM THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT**

Although complementary medicine is now a major part of the Australian healthcare industry, the Government is demanding more evidence from the suppliers of CAM regarding their quality, safety and efficacy. In Australia, Government responses to the growing popularity of CAM include policy initiatives that seek to protect consumers by regulating CAM and encouraging increased scientific research into CAM. For example, in 1996, the Australian government held the country’s first National Alternative Medicines Summit. At this Summit, Senator Grant Tambling, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Aged Care, claimed that “while many countries around the world are struggling to balance the burdens of regulation and the obligation to safeguard consumer confidence in medicines, new Australian complementary medicines legislation strikes the right balance and will be a model for regulation of complementary medicines in other parts of the world.” He argued further that “the new legislation shows that industry, consumers and the Government can work together to enhance the health choices available to all Australians.”

The Australian Government’s response to the CAM industry has involved several policy reforms, notably including:

- the establishment of an Office of Complementary Medicine within the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) to regulate CAM and to monitor its successes and adverse effects;
- the establishment of a number of committees within the Office of Complementary Medicine to oversee regulation and reform, for example the Complementary Healthcare Council of Australia and the Complementary Healthcare Consultative Forum.

These reforms include more accurate labeling to reflect increasing scientific evidence regarding CAM; advertising restrictions upon CAM manufacturers; requirements for reporting adverse effects of CAM; and consideration of a registration system for complementary practitioners.

Recent legislation in the Australian state of Victoria has paved the way for registration of Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners, and the inclusion, alongside scientific evidence, of evidence based on tradition. As Dr. Fiona Cummings, Director of the Office of Complementary Medicines, explains:

> If you’ve got a herbal product that ...has been used for hundreds of years in a particular culture, one of the ways in which you can support your claim is with evidence of traditional use. So ...you could refer to the Chinese Pharmacopoeia or something along those lines ...you would also need to qualify that this is a traditional claim, rather than being based on scientific evidence.

In summary, the Australian government’s involvement is serving on the one hand to restrict CAM, but on the other hand to incorporate CAM into the mainstream health system. Private health insurers already pay benefits for CAM, and there are calls from policy makers to consider inclusion of CAM in the tax-funded health system (Medicare), which would greatly increase CAMs’ financial attractiveness for patients and practitioners alike.

**INTEGRATION OF CAM INTO ORTHODOX MEDICAL PRACTICE**

Extrapolation from studies on general practitioner (GP) provision of CAM indicate that approximately one in five...
Australian GPs provides some form of CAM, with one metropolitan study finding that 75 percent of the GPs surveyed referred patients to CAM practitioners. The most common modalities used or recognized by GPs are acupuncture, manipulation, meditation, and nutritional and herbal medicine. Recent Australian studies show that approximately one in seven GPs use acupuncture alone. Acupuncture is a peculiar case in Australia in that it is funded by Australia’s public Medicare system if administered by a licensed orthodox physician. This provides rebates to doctors and allows consumers greater access to acupuncture, but it is disadvantageous to traditional practitioners, who do not qualify for the Medicare rebate. Exploratory research on reasons for Australian GPs’ increasing provision of CAM shows two major trends. The first is that GPs are responding to consumer demand for CAM. GPs link this consumer demand to (1) the clinical effectiveness of CAM, (2) a better educated public, (3) a wariness of synthetic drugs associated with consumer beliefs that “natural” medicines are safer, and (4) consumer demand for greater choice and autonomy regarding health.

The second trend is that GPs themselves are increasingly critical of biomedicine, noting the limitations of biomedical practice for treating many commonly presented ailments. GPs who provide CAM are characteristically interested in a more holistic and preventive approach to medicine and thus are seeking new approaches to primary healthcare, including CAM.

Currently the Australian Medical Association (AMA) — the peak body that represents Australian doctors — has formulated a policy on CAM and is recommending that “we equip our current doctors and future GPs and specialists with working knowledge of the products and therapies.”

EDUCATION

Courses on CAM are being incorporated into Australian tertiary institutions. Acupuncture, naturopathy, chiropractic, and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) are taught at several universities, including Southern Cross and Monash. The University of Queensland’s Center for The Evaluation of Complementary Health Practices is a new research center that is incorporating teaching programs in complementary health practices to (1) educate graduating health practitioners in the beneficial use of complementary practices; (2) improve understanding of the philosophy and practice of complementary health practices; and (3) establish high quality postgraduate teaching programs in this rapidly expanding area of healthcare. According to Professor Peter Brooks, Executive Dean of Health Sciences, University of Queensland, “the intention of the Center is to rapidly obtain a reputation as Australia’s leading research group in complementary therapies as well as to become established as the primary research training facility in Australia for research degrees in complementary therapies. The immediate aim of the Center is to develop web-based flexible delivery educational programs to the medical, dental, pharmacy, allied health and human movement studies professions.”

RESEARCH INITIATIVES

In addition to The University of Queensland’s Center for the Evaluation of Complementary Health Practices, a Traditional Chinese Medicine Unit at University of Western Sydney and a Natural and Complementary Medicine Teaching Clinic at Southern Cross University have been established. The University of Queensland Center, which has been partially funded by the corporate giant Faulding Healthcare, intends to work cooperatively with other CAM research centers to provide Australian communities safe access to an extended range of healthcare treatments. The Center will resort to a scientific, evidence-based approach to evaluate the efficacy and safety of CAMs, and to inform practitioners about healthcare choices. The Center also intends to work with professionals from both conventional and alternative medical practice to research the interaction between CAM and conventional medicine.

The Greenslopes Private Hospital, a teaching hospital of the University of Queensland, is already conducting a series of clinical trials, sponsored by Faulding & Co., to investigate the effect of...
natural novel marine extracts on asthma and osteo-arthritis. A wide range of clinical trials of CAM are also slated for the Greenslopes laboratories in the near future.

Other research initiatives planned for the University of Queensland Center are clarification of consumers’ reasons for using CAM and better documentation of the extent of CAM use in the community. Negotiations are currently underway with Brisbane’s Prince Charles Hospital — the home for the new Center — to conduct a hospital settings survey of patient use of CAM.

CONCLUSION

Already widespread in Australia, CAM is steadily gaining greater acceptance by government, industry, education, the medical profession, and the consuming public. While entirely traditional, “stand-alone” alternative medicine will no doubt survive in Australia, the pervasive financial realities of the tax-funded Medicare system encourage the development of a hybrid form of practice emphasizing the complementarity between Western and traditional medicines. Government policy initiatives and intensified research into CAM will serve to hasten the integration of CAM into Australian life and health by providing increasing evidence of CAM’s safety and efficacy.

Finally, there is also a clearly emerging ideological trend, among both doctors and patients, toward embracing a more holistic theory of medicine. Thus, even as CAM is being accepted into mainstream Western medicine on biomedicine’s scientific terms, so is biomedicine moving toward greater acceptance on the premises of CAM.

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DIRECTORY OF CONTRIBUTORS

Ho Walter K K
Department of Biochemistry
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Shatin, New Territories
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2609 6793
Fax: (852) 2603 5123
E-mail: b080707@mailserv.cuhk.edu.hk

Lee Henry
Chinese Medicine Development
Middlesex University
Queensway, Enfield
Middlesex EN3 4SF
United Kingdom
Tel/Fax: (44) 020 8411 6186
E-mail: H.Lee@mdx.ac.uk

Ko Kam-Ming, Robert
Department of Biochemistry
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
Clear Water Bay, Kowloon
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2358 7272
Fax: (852) 2358 1552
E-mail: bcrko@ust.hk

Man Y K Ricky
Head
Department of Pharmacology
University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2819 9250
Fax: (852) 2817 0859
E-mail: rykman@hkucc.hku.hk

Ong Choon Nam
Department of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine
Faculty of Medicine
National University of Singapore
MD3, Lower Kent Ridge Road
Singapore 119260
Singapore
Tel: (65) 874 4982
Fax: (65) 779 1489
E-mail: cofongcn@nus.edu.sg

Fung Sherman Kwok-Wing
Director of Bio-sciences
SGS Hong Kong Ltd.
5/7/F, Metropole Square
2 On Yiu Street
Shu Lek Yuen, Shatin
NT: Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 23344481
Fax: (852) 23348752
E-mail: shermanfung@hotmail.com

Lee Edmund
Innovation and Technology Commission
The Government of the Hong Kong SAR
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2737 2255
Fax: (852) 2377 0730
E-mail: etylee@itc.gov.hk

Leung Shawn
Director
Hong Kong Institute of Biotechnology
2 Biotechnology Avenue
12 Miles, Tai Po Road
Shatin, New Territories
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2603 5111
Fax: (852) 2603 5012
E-mail: eudy@hkib.org.hk

Yun Cheung Kong or Chun-Tao Che
School of Chinese Medicine
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Shatin, New Territories
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2609 8131
Fax: (852) 2603 7203
E-mail: scm@cuhk.edu.hk or chect@cuhk.edu.hk

Eastwood Heather
Department of Social and Preventive Medicine
The University of Queensland
St Lucia, QLD 4072
Australia
Tel: (617) 3346 4714
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