

Distinguishing naturopaths from wellness warriors: the case for statutory registration

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The credibility of natural medicine has again been raised in the new Netflix series *Apple Cider Vinegar*, loosely based on the true story of Annabelle Gibson.¹ The series highlights the dangers of misinformation and the exploitation of vulnerable populations, where opinion is often mistaken for fact. In an era where wellness influencers can gain widespread reach with little to no accountability, the debate over the regulation of naturopathy in Australia has intensified. High-profile figures such as Pete Evans, Elle Macpherson and Belle Gibson have promoted unverified natural health treatments, raising concerns about consumer harm and the blurred lines between wellness marketing and evidence-based practice.^{2,3} While proponents argue that statutory registration would safeguard the public by setting professional standards, critics fear increased bureaucracy, the erosion of traditional wisdom and a rigid hierarchy that may sideline experienced practitioners.

Oponents of statutory registration argue that increased governance will place an unnecessary administrative and financial burden on practitioners, potentially limiting access to care. Many naturopaths operate as small business owners, and the costs associated with compliance could make services less affordable for patients.⁴ Additionally, formalising a governance structure may fail to respect elder naturopaths and herbalists, whose experiential knowledge forms the backbone of traditional practice.⁵ The concern is that such regulation could prioritise a biomedical model at the expense of the holistic and intuitive aspects of naturopathic care.

However, the need for statutory registration far outweighs these concerns. Without regulation, there is no clear distinction between trained naturopaths and self-proclaimed wellness warriors. This lack of differentiation threatens public safety, as individuals with no formal training can promote unproven and potentially harmful treatments. Regulatory standards would help protect the integrity, reputation, and ethics of the profession by recognising the extensive pharmacological, pathological, physiological, and psychological knowledge gained through naturopathic education and training.⁶ This

framework would reinforce evidence-based practice, ensuring that clinical decisions are grounded in established safety and efficacy guidelines rather than anecdotal experience alone.

Proponents also argue that statutory registration could elevate research literacy within the profession, equipping practitioners with the skills to critically assess scientific evidence while preserving naturopathy's distinct philosophical roots.^{4,7} Rather than diminishing traditional knowledge, regulation would integrate it with evidence-based practice, ensuring that practitioners meet rigorous educational and professional standards.^{8,9} A structured framework would also enhance naturopathy's engagement with scientific advancements, strengthening its credibility while maintaining its foundational principles.

While concerns about additional governance are valid, a structured regulatory framework is expected to actually enhance professional autonomy by reinforcing naturopathy's place within the broader healthcare system.¹⁰ Registration would facilitate collaboration with health professionals, improving the likelihood of naturopaths being integrated into primary healthcare initiatives. This would ultimately expand access to evidence-based natural therapies for patients, while reducing the risk of misinformation-driven health decisions.

Evidence-based naturopathy is not a rejection of tradition but a refinement of it. A profession grounded in holism, plants, optimal health and prevention must be supported by the best available evidence, expert opinions, and patient values—not the persuasive marketing of unqualified influencers. As Hippocrates wisely noted, “*Life is short, the art long, opportunity fleeting, experience deceptive, judgment difficult,*” underscoring the necessity of rigorous training and critical thinking in healthcare practice.¹¹ The future of naturopathy in Australia depends on its ability to evolve while remaining true to its roots—ensuring both professional integrity and public safety through statutory regulation.