

MEDIA RELEASE

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Delays in statutory registration of naturopaths exposes public to ongoing risk

Today Marilyn Bodnar, the Sydney woman who claimed to be a fully qualified naturopath, pleaded guilty to instructing a breast-feeding mother to follow a diet which resulted in her baby becoming dangerously underweight and malnourished. This recent development has again put registration of naturopaths back in the spotlight.

“The chain of events which led to the near death of an 8 month old infant was both preventable and predictable” says Dr Amie Steel, Director of the Australian Register of Naturopaths and Herbalists (ARONAH).

Naturopaths have been formally assessed by government reviews which have recommended that they need to be regulated by government but still are not currently included in the national registration scheme. According to Dr Steel, “Every government report looking at this issue in the last 15 years has come to the same conclusion: that the risks associated with naturopathy are significant and registration should be implemented, however all of them have still failed to act on this”.

Currently naturopathy is self-regulated by professional associations, which have varying standards of entry. There is no restriction of title for naturopathy, meaning that anyone can legally use the term, whether or not they have any qualifications. It also means that there are no probity checks for those who use the title.

Due to a lack of statutory registration, there is currently no restriction on who can and who cannot call themselves a naturopath which places the public at risk of seeing an unqualified practitioner. Upon establishment of the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme, the government committed to developing a pathway to assess the eligibility of new professions to enter the scheme. However, this pathway has still not been forthcoming and as a result, the public remain unprotected by unqualified individuals using the naturopathic title to attract paying clients.

“The government HAS to take some kind of accountability for this development. The New South Wales government acknowledged the need to regulate naturopaths over a decade ago. They have failed in their commitment to the public by taking an unacceptably long time to develop the necessary pathway to assess new professions for statutory registration. Until this is achieved, the public will continue to be at risk from individuals who inappropriately use the title of naturopath without complying with the practice and education standards held by the profession”.

Currently, to provide recognised naturopathic training in Australia colleges must deliver a four-year accredited degree. However, the lack of regulation of the profession means that the training of those using the title could range from self-education, a basic online course to postgraduate university qualifications.

Dr Steel adds “Most practitioners *are* doing the right thing, and practise safely and effectively, but without regulation it is up to the patient to identify whether their practitioner is qualified”. Dr Steel suggests asking practitioners about their training, professional association membership and whether they are entitled to offer health fund rebates for their naturopathic consultations. “Whilst these aren’t perfect measures, they do offer some indication of whether a naturopathic practitioner is legitimately qualified”.

Existing protections in place for the public in relation to naturopathic practice include negative licensure. However, this can only catches people once the damage has been done. ARONAH - a voluntary independent register set up by the profession – has been developed to mirror the standards of the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme, is somewhat limited by its voluntary nature.. “This still leaves the public exposed to unqualified and unsafe practitioners with no real way of discerning the difference because there are practitioners who choose not to register with ARONAH, or practitioners using the title who would not be eligible to join ARONAH” says Dr Steel.

“ARONAH regularly receives complaints about naturopaths and herbalists but these have never related to practitioners on our register, there needs to be a better way. This is why we fully support government regulation of naturopaths under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency”.

About the Australian Register of Naturopaths and Herbalists

The Australian Register of Naturopaths and Herbalists has been established to provide minimum standards of education and practice for naturopathy and Western herbal medicine. The Board has developed this independent register which mirrors government requirements for the regulation of health practitioners. Specifically, ARONAH mirrors the statutorily regulated Boards administered by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Authority of the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme. Naturopathy and Western herbal medicine are not regulated professions in Australia and do not currently fall under this scheme.

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