

MEDIA RELEASE

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Government delaying registration of naturopaths exposes public to ongoing risk

The sentencing of Marilyn Bodnar - a Sydney woman claiming to be a naturopath, was sentenced to 14 months in prison for instructing a breast-feeding mother to follow a liquid-only diet resulting in significant harm to the infant - has again drawn attention to the need for registration of naturopaths.

“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).

“Bodnar does not hold any qualifications as a naturopath. She should not have been able to use the title of naturopath. The patient would likely not have consulted her had she known about Bodnar’s lack of qualifications. It is misleading for the public”.

Statutory registration of health practitioners under the Australian National Registration and Accreditation Scheme requires certain conditions such as minimum levels of training be met before an individual can use a professional title.

Naturopathy is the only profession formally assessed by the government as requiring registration – it has been tabled at the Council of Australian Governments since 2008 – that is still still not included in the Scheme.

“Every government report looking at this issue in the last 15 years has come to the same conclusion: registration should of naturopaths be implemented to protect the public. However, no government has yet acted on their own recommendations. This includes the NSW government which said it should have registered naturopaths back in 2006” said Dr Jon Wardle, head of regulatory, policy and legislative stream at the Australian Research Centre in Complementary and Integrative Medicine, at the University of Technology Sydney.

“There have been some initiatives to improve regulation of unregistered practitioners – such as the NSW government’s negative licensing laws, and these have certainly helped improved protection for some health professions. However, it’s also been used an excuse to stop taking action on profession’s that need to be registered, as these models just aren’t as effective for professions like naturopathy” he adds.

Currently naturopathy is self-regulated by professional associations, which all have different standards of entry. Although colleges can now only teach four-year degrees for naturopathy to be accredited under education regulation, there is no requirement for practitioners to graduate from these courses to practice.

There is no restriction of title for naturopathy, meaning that anyone can legally use the term, regardless of their qualifications. Lack of registration also means that there are no probity checks for those who use the title:

“The profession has known about Bodnar and her inappropriate use of the naturopathic title for a number of years but have had no recourse. The association she was claiming membership of was notified but still nothing was done”, says Dr Steel.

Natalie Cook, Chair of the Naturopaths and Herbalists Association of Australia says “The public must have confidence that when someone calls themselves a naturopath, that the education and licensing requirements exist that not only protect the public but maintain the integrity of our ethical practitioners”.

“Most naturopaths in Australia are now required to complete a 4 year degree with a strong foundation in biological sciences to meet requirements for practice. When someone with no recognised training in naturopathy is able to claim to be a naturopath and then be found to cause harm in doing so, the whole profession is unfairly tarnished”.

Dr Steel says there are some measures patients can take to ensure their practitioners are qualified:

“Asking practitioners about their training, professional association membership and whether they are entitled to offer health fund rebates for their naturopathic consultations offer some indication of whether a naturopathic practitioner is legitimately qualified. Patients can also complain to the Health Care Complaints Commission if they do have a complaint about an individual practitioner”.

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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