

# Conference report: The 9th International Conference of Herbal Medicine

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## Day one

The 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Herbal Medicine was held at the Novotel Brighton Beach in Sydney, Australia from 20-22 March 2015. The conference was hosted by the National Herbalists Association of Australia and included a variety of talks by local and international experts with a focus on sustainable health care. With a welcome to country delivered by Donna Ingram, followed by the President's address from Leah Hechtman, day one of the conference proceedings were underway.

Jonathan Treasure was the first of three international keynote speakers to present and he spoke on the crisis occurring in Western herbal medicine; outlining many of the challenges faced by the modern practitioner. He touched on key issues such as a move towards favouring scientific research over herbal monographs, and how a herb is now being defined by what an expert discovers it has the power to do, not necessarily what those from our history such as Culpepper and Paracelsus showed us it could do. Jonathan proposed that herbal medicine, as it is today, must make a fundamental shift in thinking in

order to become a profession that is widely accepted as a discipline of medical and life sciences; in doing so, however, we must not lose touch with our past.

Dr Joe Pizzorno was the second keynote speaker and discussed environmental and endogenous toxins as the primary causes of disease in the modern world. He considers toxic load to be the most important risk factor in the development of chronic illness in Western civilisations and believes ongoing exposure to persistent organic pollutants (POPs) increases the likelihood of developing chronic conditions. As examples he quoted statistics that show breast cancer has doubled in the last 20 years while type 2 diabetes has tripled, which Dr Pizzorno believes can be directly attributed to toxins such as lead, mercury, arsenic and cadmium, all of which increase free radical production and damage mitochondrial DNA. He further gave an extensive review of the way in which these toxins cause harm, the primary diseases they can produce or exacerbate, how as practitioners we can assess the toxic load and detoxification function of clients, and ways to reduce intake/production and boost detoxification/excretion.



A plenary session with Dr Michael McMullen

Phil Rasmussen gave a talk on developing sustainable prescribing habits by only using herbs at a rate they can be renewed. He further acknowledged the importance of ensuring our prescribing practices don't contribute to the loss of biodiversity. There are concerns that an increase in the spread of noxious plants in non-indigenous habitats is the direct result of climate change along with a growth in rates of global travel and trade. Phil gave examples of a number of these invasive plants with confirmed medicinal benefits that could be wildcrafted for use in herbal medicines thereby reducing the threat of extinction faced by many of our endangered species. This is a small change that is easily implemented and would benefit both our clients and the environment.

The morning session concluded with Dr Hans Wohlmuth who spoke on the variation in both quality and potency of herbal medicines. Dr Wohlmuth completed a comparative testing program on various herbal medicines from the Australian and international markets that included practitioner-only and retail products. He found that the current use of herb-to-extract ratio and dry herb equivalence are not an accurate means of quantifying the potency of a herbal medicine. He suggests instead that incorporating these as guides in combination with key active compounds within an herb product, would produce a more precise description of a medicine's potency.

Four streams of discussion were run in the afternoon session with delegates having the option to choose between rooms and topics of interest.

The first stream focused on sustainable health and wellness in the clinical setting and included talks by Michelle Boyd on the efficacy and safety of herbal medicines for women transiting menopause, Sandra Villella on oestrogen modulating herbs and dietary

phytoestrogens for menstrual migraines, and Rebecca Hughes on the role of naturopaths and herbalists in the detection and prevention of metabolic syndrome.

The second stream focused on the sustainability of health and wellness in clinical practice. This included talks by Dr Karen Bridgman and Jennie Burke on the latest research outlining the clinical use of herbal medicines in the management and treatment of exotic infections, Karen McElroy on reconnecting with the heart of practice and Warren Maginn on differentiating between coeliac disease and non-coeliac gluten sensitivity through accurate clinical assessment.

The third stream focused on sustainable practice in research and included talks by Jane Frawley and Erica McIntyre on the declining numbers of naturopathic and Western herbal medicine consultations despite increased herbal medicine use, Emma Boucher on the use of complementary therapies by registered psychologists, Dr Stuart Glastonbury on naturopathic cooperative clinics providing a sustainable and equitable alternative to the private fee-for-service model and Jeff Flatt on the ideals and realities of evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence.

The fourth stream focused on sustainability of herbal medicines and contained two workshop-style discussions. The first was run by Peter Lewis, and was concerned with sustainable phytomedicine manufacturing along with taking a clinical-based approach toward using fresh produce with suitable menstruum. The second workshop was run by Janet Scholoss and centred on the potential use of herbal medicines in chemotherapy induced peripheral neuropathy (CIPN).

Two final discussions concluded day one. The first was given by Dr Michael McMullen who discussed his research



A very warm welcome from NHA president Leah Hechtman



A social chat with Jonathon Treasure



on the effect of *Artemisia absinthium* and *Gentiana lutea* on gastric phase postprandial haemodynamics. The findings challenged current thinking on the appropriate use of bitters as the results indicate that bitters elicit improved effects post- rather than pre-meals. The second was given by Dr Jason Hawrelak and centred on creating, sustaining, and restoring a healthy gastrointestinal tract ecosystem. It has long been thought that the inclusion of probiotic supplements in the diet helps to restore and rebuild damaged microbiota. However, research now shows that re-populating or re-inoculating the gut with supplements alone is not effective. Jason suggests we must instead nourish and restore each patient's unique microbiota utilising specific herbal medicines, foods and probiotic strains.

## Day two

Day two commenced with a small number of delegates having the opportunity to listen to Dr Joe Pizzorno speak at an intimate breakfast. He shared many pearls of wisdom with regards to effective treatment plans for a number of conditions that he has amassed during his time in practice. He also spoke of his work on the World's Healthiest Foods site and discussed the need for an official position statement from naturopathic associations regarding vaccination.

Dr Michael McMullen officially got day two of the conference underway with his discussion on reprogramming herbalists' mindsets regarding the theory and use of bitters. This gave a more in-depth review of the practical application of his research discussed on day one.

Associate Professor Kerry Bone gave a fascinating talk on the unrealised potential and unexpected outcomes of treating the microcirculation with herbs. Research has shown that changes to the microcirculation could play a key role in the development of many chronic diseases. A/Professor Bone believes that dietary protocols that specifically treat the microcirculation, in combination

with key herbs that can be administered in tablet or liquid form, will make a very sustainable and affordable strategy that will significantly improve the health of our clients.

Dr Joe Pizzorno expanded his day one discussion on the effects of exogenous and endogenous toxic load on the body to include the optimisation of mitochondrial function for longevity, vitality and the prevention of disease. Adenosine triphosphate (ATP) was a focus, as an adequate production by the mitochondria is essential for health and wellbeing. Dr Pizzorno defined how to recognise dysfunctional mitochondria and optimal strategies to re-establish and improve their function. A variety of herbs and nutrients that help with mitochondrial health were outlined, including *Ginkgo biloba* (that protects mitochondria from damage and increases ATP



Dr Joe Pizzorno receiving a thank-you present from NHAH president Leah Hechtman



Dr Jason Hawrelak sharing his wisdom on the gastrointestinal ecosystem

production), along with alpha lipoic acid, glutathione and coenzyme Q10 as examples.

Mid-morning talks concentrated on clinical practice and education. Dr Jon Wardle looked at the existence of the natural therapies profession, and proposed a move away from using such terms as they have no historical basis and are not recognised outside the complementary and integrative medicine community. He suggests we should instead be striving for individual disciplines such as herbal medicine and naturopathy to establish strong and unique identities. It is essential for herbalists and naturopaths to re-establish their unique identity ensure their ongoing viability.

Belinda Robson spoke on the rarity of the modern apothecary and the herbalist's retreat into private practice with appointments that are predominantly only within the reach of middle-upper socioeconomic clients. She highlighted the opportunity we have to revitalise this once common business offering to work in conjunction with these practices as well as supporting other health practitioners through cross referrals and collaborative professional relationships. The modern apothecary would enable our professions to offer a broader cross section of the population healthier and more sustainable ways of life, thus reducing the burden on the health budget. Belinda believes that the modern day apothecary is a sustainable business model, a valuable and needed community service, and a means by which we can expand and fortify our profession.

Ian Breakspear reviewed the current model of clinical outcome measures in practice and education and whether they are effective. He proposed that herbalists and naturopaths must demonstrate both efficacy and relevance

in practice if they are to become sustainable health care professions. Ian suggested the most important aspect of determining efficacy relies on the consistent utilisation of clinical outcome measures. He gave insight into how these could be used in the formative and summative assessment of students in clinical training, improving both their learning and clinical skill. He believes that all herbalists and naturopaths can strengthen the evidence base, and therefore the sustainability of our professions through the application of outcome measures in practice.

Brendan Penwarden completed the mid-morning sessions with his talk on entrepreneurship in holistic healthcare, and the key elements required to create a successful healthcare business.

As occurred on day one, the afternoon session saw another four streams of discussion for delegates to choose from. The first stream again focused on sustainable health and wellness in the clinical setting that included talks by Amina Eastham-Hillier on assessing the complex chronic patient, Therasia Jennings on the clinical presentation of Australian Lyme Disease as it pertains to the herbalist and naturopathic practitioner; and Belinda Robson on whether ADHD is a modern epidemic or a symptom of an unsustainable society.

The second stream involved talks on health, wellness and sustainability in clinical practice, including talks by Daniel Robson on chronic prostatitis and chronic pelvic pain syndrome, Keonie Moore on sustaining our passion for practice with healthy business models; and Sally Chick on the herbal war on drugs.

The third stream centred on new research on women's health with papers presented by Helene Diezel on perceptions and practice behaviours of midwives



Integria at the industry profesisonal dinner



and naturopaths after inter-professionals education intervention, Dr Amie Steel on the labour and birth outcomes associated with the use of herbal medicine in pregnancy, Sandy Davidson on how GUM microbiome influences pregnancy outcome and infant health, Rhiannon Hardingham on sustainable collaborative management of patients undergoing AFT/IVF, Dr Thomas Harris on immunology patterns in endometriosis and the herbal medicine approach to treatment; and Susan Arentz on findings of a systematic review on naturopathy for the management of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).

The fourth stream looked at education with discussions by Dr Stuart Glastonbury on enhancing undergraduate clinical training and integrated care through a naturopathic support worker model, Dr Jason Hawrelak on the Gould's internship program, Helene Diezel on clinical supervisor intervention fostering excellence in clinical herbal medicine education, Jane Hutchens on current perspectives in complementary health education, Dr Amie Steel on developing research capacities within private herbal and naturopathic medicine education, and Alastair Gray on the dynamics and changing attitudes of the student body in natural medicine. This stream continued on into the afternoon with a further talk by Alastair Gray on immediate challenges facing herbal medicine and naturopathy education and finished with a panel discussion on examining and enhancing undergraduate clinical training and the transition into independent clinical practice. The panel included Jane Hutchens, Ian Breakspear and Amanda Reimann and was chaired by Dr Stuart Glastonbury.

Two keynote speakers concluded the day two sessions. Jonathan Treasure spoke about the often-debated beneficial drug-herb interactions in oncology. When administered concomitantly in cancer treatment, herbal medicines are often implicated as the cause of mainstream drug failure regardless of the lack of evidence, making it difficult for patients to make informed decisions about their broader treatment plans. Jonathan reviewed theoretical, ideological, evidential, practical and clinical management aspects of treating these complex patients, providing examples of the way in which both mainstream and herbal treatments could be co-administered for enhanced treatment outcomes.

Dr Pizzorno was the final speaker, and discussed the growing epidemic of dementia we are facing including the financial burden on our health care system, which is set to triple within the next four years. Neurological dysfunction is often the cause of conditions such as autism, Alzheimer's disease, dementia, epilepsy and Parkinson's disease to name a few. Dr Pizzorno outlined the ways in which natural therapies can be used to help prevent and slow neurological degeneration and accumulated damage, also referring to his earlier discussion on protecting mitochondrial function as this plays a key role in preventing and reversing neurological damage.

### Day three

The third and final day of the conference began with a presentation by Jill Dunn on challenges in herbal medicine clinic research and moving towards evidence-based practice. Results from an on-line cross-sectional survey of CAM practitioners found that while the majority of respondents held a bachelor degree or higher, and were in favour of statutory regulation of the industry, most lacked the skills required to interpret research or conduct research of their own. This leaves a significant gap in our ability to shift from traditional herbal medicine practice to evidence-based practice, along with confounding factors such as cost and accessibility of databases for example. Jill argued that to shift from our traditional forms of practice to evidence-based practice we are reliant on both a strong core curriculum and an improved practitioner research capacity.

Dr Amie Steel gave a talk on the vital role that practitioners play in driving the research agenda, given herbal medicine and naturopathy are now being practiced in a society that values evidence-based medicine above all.



Janet Schloss AJHM best article award recipient

Dr Steel discussed the need for practitioner involvement in future research in our respective fields, to ensure study outcomes are of value to herbal medicine clinicians. This will further enable practitioners to embrace the evidence-based approach in the clinical setting, in conjunction with the more traditional approach that the majority of practitioners are using.

Greg Whitten and Dr Jason Hawrelak gave an engaging talk on rediscovering motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*) which was held in high regard in our history for its nervine and thymoleptic properties and has since been all but forgotten. The discussion focused on the growing, harvesting and processing of the herb, the latter in particular impacting on the overall quality and effectiveness of the final product. Dr Hawrelak also spoke about his experience with motherwort in clinical practice where he has found it works extremely well and very quickly when treating conditions relating to anxiety and depression.

Dr Brad McEwen completed the morning session with his presentation on the role of the herbal medicine practitioner in the prevention and management of cardiovascular disease (CVD). He reviewed the various herbs that have been shown to be effective in treating CVD including ginkgo, ginger, hawthorn, rosemary and turmeric as examples, along with ways in which these herbs could be applied in clinical practice to treat both CVD and associated diseases. He further discussed the possibility of herb-drug interactions and how these could be avoided.

Interactive workshops and master-classes were run in place of discussion streams throughout the early morning and afternoon but maintained similar themes. The sustainable health and wellness workshop focused on pulmonary-cardiovascular integration and the importance of a complete cardiovascular profile, which was run by Dr Michael McMullen. The masterclass was run by Jonathan Treasure and was an opportunity to hear some insights he has gained from 15 years of clinical experience in the cancer field.

The sustainable practice workshop was hosted by Dr Sue Evans and Greg Whitten and looked at organolepsis with an option to touch and taste many different forms of common herbal medicines. There was further discussion that questioned whether we might have lost touch with our plants through the use of brown bottle medicine. The master-class run by Clifford Moss and Simon Davies focused on developing a point of difference in business, including attracting and retaining the right type of employees and giving your business a competitive edge.

The research in practice workshop lead by Dr Matthew Leach and Tamara Agnew reviewed the best way to build a research culture in Western Herbal medicine, while the master-class by Jane Frawley and Dr Amie Steel centred on how practitioners can get their work published.

The final workshop of the afternoon was a panel

discussion moderated by Dr Judy Singer with panellists including Gill Stannard, Jenny Adams, Dr Assunta Hunter and Dr Sue Evans. Each of these practitioners shared some insight into their years of practice and how they have been able to maintain their profession and pay the bills. Many key points were made including the importance of work, life, balance, working with mentors and the possibility of bringing skills from previous careers with you to incorporate into your new field.

Leah Hechtman, the president of the National Herbalists association, gave a final speech to close three full days of the conference and encouraged everyone to take part in their local chapter meetings to strengthen skills and networks prior to the next national conference.

As a student of naturopathy I found the conference to be an invaluable experience. I was one of very few students in attendance and would encourage others to attend the next conference regardless of where they find themselves in their studies. Having the opportunity to listen and talk to so many accomplished practitioners who brought the information contained within the pages of our textbooks to life is something that is not to be missed. I would also encourage students to sign up to the NHAA if they are not currently members. I have found the association to be extremely supportive and helpful in all of my interactions with them and the chapter meetings run in each state are another opportunity to be involved with and learn from more experienced practitioners. There are many associations we can join as students but the NHAA is the oldest professional association and it is truly practitioner focused.

Recordings of the NHAA International Conference on Herbal Medicine are available from <http://www.nhaa.org.au/publications/notes-recordings>.



Dr Ses Salmond MC for the industry profession dinner

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