Being herbal practitioners: The experience of five prominent Australian herbalists

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Abstract

In this article a group of five naturopaths and herbalists discuss their professional trajectories and outline the pathways they have taken as practitioners over the last 35 years. It emphasises the variety of ways that naturopathic and herbal training can be used, and how it can provide the basis for post-graduate education. There are many career pathways open to practitioners with undergraduate clinical skills. The sustainability of practice may be dependent on specialising in a particular area of practice or diversifying into other forms of practice or other disciplines.

There is more than one way to skin a cat, as Assunta's Glasgwegian mother used to say. And indeed there is more than one way to be a herbalist.

In Australia undergraduate training to be a naturopath or a herbalist in the last 35 years has generally taken the form of studying a three- or four-year course at a private naturopathic college.[1, 2] There was a period between 1995 and 2010 when undergraduate degrees in naturopathy were offered at a number of Australian universities, but in recent years this has given way to degree courses being offered only through private colleges, probably due to a combination of economic forces and external pressure from groups like Friends of Science in Medicine to exclude the teaching of complementary medicine from academic institutions.[3, 4] Evolving patterns of practice in Australia suggest that the workforce is predominantly female and that most naturopaths and herbalists are in solo practice. Only 7% work in multi-disciplinary clinics.[5]

In this article a group of five naturopaths and herbalists discuss their professional trajectories and outline the pathways they have taken as practitioners over the last 35 years. The article examines the professional lives of five women practitioners who came together through VicHerbalists, the Melbourne chapter of the NHAA, and who have been active in the development of herbal medicine teaching and the development of local communities of practice in herbal medicine in Australia today. We presented this material at the 2015 NHAA International Conference where we discussed what had been important to us in how we established our professional lives. Rather than address only the financial aspects of being a successful practitioner, we talked about what drew us to naturopathy and herbal medicine and how we carved out rewarding and financially stable professional lives.

Our biographies emphasise the variety of ways that naturopathic and herbal training can be used, and how it can provide the basis for post-graduate education in both similar and different areas. Four of us graduated from a four-year diploma course in naturopathy in Australia between the late 1970s and early 1990s and one of us studied to be a herbal medicine practitioner in England in the late 1970s — early 1980s. At the time these courses were seen as leading almost exclusively to a career as a practitioner.

Our experiences highlight how we have built on undergraduate training in naturopathy and herbal medicine, and show how practice-based training can open doors to other professional paths. This article can be read as an historical account of how we as individual herbal and naturopathic practitioners have created a variety of new careers from very similar undergraduate training. It can also be read as a way of reflecting on the idea that clinical practice is just one of a variety of career pathways for people with an undergraduate herbal medicine or naturopathy qualification. It illustrates some of the potential places where naturopaths can practice and some of the paths that were open to us at the time we were pursuing careers, building on our disciplinary interests and basic training. It is striking that there were very few

ways of being employed as a naturopath, at least in the period from 1980 to 2000. It was perhaps in part because of this lack of employment opportunity that we each had to look creatively at our own career development. Our cases illustrate how we were able to earn financially stable independent incomes in the Australian context. These are not the only ways of earning a sustainable living in this field but we do note that for naturopaths there are not the same range of options for work in the health system as there are for other graduate health practitioners.

The article takes up the stories of these practitioners.

Jenny Adams — Collaborative practice in public and community health

I feel fortunate to have been in the 'right place at the right time', entering the naturopathic profession in the late 1980s at a time when naturopathy was steadily gaining popular appeal. On graduating I joined one of Melbourne's first multidisciplinary (now called integrative) medical clinics. Riding the zeitgeist of the time, at its peak our clinic comprised a team of four doctors, two psychologists, a massage therapist and osteopath, while upstairs we ran a program of yoga classes every night. I loved working as part of a multidisciplinary team, as 'unconventional' as some of my colleagues were! Unfortunately none of us were particularly business savvy; eventually we incurred considerable debt and made the decision to close. By then I was clear that solo practice was not for me — I thrived on the stimulation, the cross-fertilisation of ideas and the challenges of working in a multidisciplinary environment.

Back in my student days I had done a year of clinical observation with Ruth Trickey, gaining invaluable experience from Ruth's mentorship. I was in awe of Ruth's professionalism, diverse skills (naturopath, herbalist, midwife, acupuncturist) and encyclopaedic knowledge. When the opportunity arose I jumped at the chance to join Ruth's clinic, a dynamic team of talented practitioners. For the next six years I became immersed in the world of women's health and collaborative health care.

Periodically, when I felt the need to increase my skill set and expand my horizons, I enrolled in further study. I was midway through a Graduate Diploma in Health Counselling when I attended a Victorian Herbalists' meeting one night where my friend and colleague Judy Singer spoke about the fascinating cross-cultural work she was doing at Foundation House[6], a mental health agency for refugees. Within six months I was doing a clinical placement there, the following year I was employed, and 17 years later I'm still there (part time). It is a rare privilege as a naturopath to work with such a large health care team and diverse client group. I still get a lift from walking through a waiting room full of people from all over the world!

Through my work at Foundation House and an international residency in 2002 — a research project conducted with the Tibetan refugee community living in exile in India — I became more interested in the global picture of naturopathy and traditional medicine.[7] These experiences inspired me to undertake my Master's in Public Health. I continue to pursue a passion for promoting the integration of naturopathy into community settings and the broader public health arena. I see this as the naturopathy of the future.

Sue Evans — Expanding choices through further education

As I look back on my herbal life there has been a dance between life and work as my work shaped my life and my life shaped my work. Opportunities in herbal medicine have affected how and where I have lived, and choices about the life I want to live have affected what herbal opportunities I have sought and been able to take up.

From my earliest days as a student I loved the feeling that I had 'room to move', that I need not be tied to doing one thing all my life. However I have found that my herbal training was not enough to let me make these sideways moves. I needed further qualifications.

I started clinical practice in 1982, on my return home to Melbourne after completing my training with the National Institute of Medical Herbalists in the UK. A few years later I was enjoying teaching at Southern School of Natural Therapies, and seeing myself as a teacher as well as a herbalist. This led me to take time out to return to university to complete an education qualification. At the time I had no particular expectation of where this might lead, but some years later it assisted me in being appointed to the position of foundation lecturer in the Bachelor of Naturopathy program at Southern Cross University.

The experience of establishing that program — the first naturopathic degree at a publicly funded Australian university — was great fun; a huge challenge and it changed me. I started to 'think academically' and was invited to participate in research projects both in Australia and overseas and once again, I enjoyed the process. I also found that there are so many interesting research questions! But, in order to be able to generate my own projects, I needed training. This meant a PhD — with all its associated false starts and hiccoughs.

The skills I developed during my PhD process enabled me to begin researching my own questions and continues to give me a sense of having 'room to move' within the world of medicinal plants. Clinical practice and undergraduate teaching have now given way to working with groups and institutions on a range of projects, as well as continuing with my own research priorities — including issues around contemporary medicinal plant supply chains, and the role of medicinal plants in Australian colonial history.

My training as a herbalist has been a wonderful foundation — but it has been very much a starting point, not an endpoint.

Assunta Hunter — Cross cultural perspectives on the developing profession

After graduating from the Southern School of Natural Therapies in 1982 I set up practice first in Canberra and then in Melbourne. My plan such as it was, saw no further than practice but teaching quickly became part of my career. I practiced mostly in a women's health area and taught naturopathic philosophy and herbal medicine for more than 25 years.

A combination of teaching and watching the way herbal and naturopathic professions were changing, encouraged me to consider how 'others' saw my profession, and to reflect on the process of change the professions were clearly undertaking in the 1990s. I engaged in the rough and tumble of politics, first on the Executive of the Australian Natural Therapies Association and then on the Board of the National Herbalists Association of Australia. There I was both observer and agent of some of the shifts in education, philosophy and practice which were produced from within the profession and as a response to external factors like the Therapeutic Goods Act (1989) and the increasing public usage and acceptance of herbal medicines and naturopathy. Naturopathy and herbal medicine were gaining legitimacy and seemed to be becoming mainstream. I began to reflect on these processes of professional development and the patterns of change that were emerging not just in Australia but in traditional medicine systems world-wide.

As someone who saw a large number of menopause patients I was part of the surge in women's usage of naturopathy, which saw many women choose herbal medicines in preference to Hormone Replacement Therapy. I completed a Master of Women's Health as part of my desire to pursue a more academic path and also because it opened the doors to new disciplines that looked at what I did in different ways. Medical history, and medical anthropology offered new ways of thinking about the roles that herbalists had taken in history and in other cultures.

By the time I stopped practising in 2008 I had decided that my next path was looking at how traditional medicine systems re-invented themselves in response to modernity and how the processes of professionalization had occurred in other cultures. My doctoral research centred on how the education of traditional medicine practitioners had changed in Thailand in the last 30 years.

Judy Singer — Applying naturopathic perspectives to social science research

During my student days at the Southern School of Natural Therapies I was fortunate to be taught by a number of inspiring teachers. My naturopathic training became more of a 'world-view' than a career path and I developed a passion to work as a naturopath in contexts where people would not ordinarily have access to naturopathic treatment.

In the early 1990s, a colleague, Tracey Potter and I established a naturopathic clinic within a women's prison in Melbourne. Funded by a philanthropic trust, we provided individual consultations and ran an ongoing educational program focusing on wellbeing practices. Given the constraints, we were inventive! Concurrently, I started working as a naturopath at Foundation House — a mental health service for refugees. Responding to a request for volunteer naturopathic practitioners from the recently established complementary therapies program at Foundation House, I joined the team. Twelve months later I took on the position of complementary therapies coordinator. A few years later my colleague Jenny Adams also joined the Foundation House team.

After ten years working with refugees I felt compelled to document this innovative program that uses complementary therapies alongside psychological therapies to support refugee survivors of torture and trauma.[6] In my role as a naturopath my knowledge base had developed but I did not have an opportunity for critical reflection. So I embarked on a PhD exploring the meanings and experiences of naturopathic treatment in a refugee healthcare context.[8]

Since completing my PhD I have been employed by the University Centre for Rural Health in Lismore (University of Sydney) as a research officer. I no longer work as a naturopathic practitioner, but still have a keen interest in the profession, particularly from a research perspective. Recently I conducted a qualitative study exploring the roles and perspectives of managers of public healthcare services that have included complementary therapies as part of their service delivery. This gave me the opportunity to further my interest in exploring how complementary therapies can be provided in public healthcare settings.[9, 10]

My current academic work involves research in Aboriginal mental health. Although technically far from 'naturopathic practice', my embedded naturopathic knowledge has served me well in this work. Viewing health, and particularly mental health, in terms of 'social and emotional wellbeing' is remarkably similar to applying naturopathic principles and a holistic worldview. So, twenty-five years on, and in a very different work context, core naturopathic understandings are still a guiding influence for me.

Gill Stannard — An evolving practice

When I graduated from the Southern School of Natural Therapies in 1991, employment opportunities were limited to a few jobs in health food stores. Private practice as a sole operator was basically my only option. The practice model was equally limited; you could set up on your own clinic, operate from home or join an existing clinic. Naturopathy was viewed as a vocation rather than a potentially lucrative business. I followed the path unquestioningly with more ideals than business

sense. My first year was very lean, paying the rent with a part-time administration job in a related industry. But within 18 months of starting practice, the clinic was my primary income.

Having worked previously in non-profit and government sectors, I lacked business skills. However, a couple of years into my new career, taking over the lease of the group practice I worked in, provided a steep and un-mentored learning curve. Running City Natural Therapies in Melbourne for more than two decades brought more profit than loss. But it also came with various unexpected stresses. These included relocating the clinic at short notice and annual negotiations with real estate agents. There were also sometimes issues with practitioners who sub-let rooms in the practice, with building management and with other tenants.

I am not sure I would have survived those initial years of practice if I had not for been involved in VicHerbalists. The ongoing learning, friendships and mentoring were invaluable. The skills I bought from my life before naturopathy were also useful — especially critical thinking, writing and communication abilities developed through a political science degree and research jobs. But surprisingly, it was my earlier involvement in student radio that landed me a talkback show about natural therapies, which ran for almost 20 years. Community radio helped me grow my practice from the start, also creating television and writing opportunities that helped publicise the profession.

While most of my practice over the decades has been old-fashioned naturopathic consulting, professional supervision arose from teaching final-year herbal medicine at Sothern School of Natural Therapies. Eighteen years ago, there was little or no support for new practitioners so I started offering group and individual supervision. This has blossomed to supporting practitioners in all stages of practice from newbie to mid-career and beyond.

After closing the clinic in 2014 and moving to Sydney I have adopted a coaching model as a new way of sharing my clinical experience and grass roots naturopathic principles. I continue to work with old and new clients around the world and support fellow practitioners.

Conclusion

There are now a greater variety of paths for practitioners who have completed an undergraduate qualification. Some people never practice even after undertaking a three- or four-year course. The majority of practitioners are in part-time practice, which they may combine with other forms of employment. Employment in pharmacies, health food stores and in naturopathic practices doing dispensary and clinic work have emerged as options in the last 15 years. The growth of the herbal medicine industry has provided roles for many practitioners either in research, technical writing or as sales managers. Some practitioners pursue further studies in post-graduate courses in related modalities, and in public health. Academic careers for naturopaths researching their own profession are an emerging option.

Twenty five to thirty years since we started our careers as naturopaths and herbalists, there are now many career pathways open to practitioners with undergraduate clinical skills. Setting up a solo practice is not the only way to earn a living using the skills and knowledge learnt in a naturopathic degree. The sustainability of practice may be dependent on specialising in a particular area of practice or diversifying into other forms of practice or other disciplines. Working collaboratively and working in public health settings using herbal and naturopathic skills is possible. Using undergraduate skills to move into other areas such as psychology, medicine and teaching are all career paths that have opened up in the last 15-20 years. As practitioners move through their working life they may be swayed by longer-term considerations of sustainability, like accumulating superannuation. Ultimately, their careers, like ours, will be guided by their interests and values and their desire to create meaningful work, building on their original herbal or naturopathic training.

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