

# Complementary Health

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AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN  
COMPLEMENTARY HEALTH  
HEALTH AND AGEING

*Complementary medicines and therapies help keep people well and ward off ill-health and disease and play a pivotal role in reducing the economic burden on the health system. However, governments and decision-makers in mainstream health services have to date largely ignored the benefits of this component of health.*

## Our Action Plan

- A system of regulation for complementary healthcare products that recognises the lower risk nature of these products when compared to prescribed synthetic pharmaceutical drugs, encourages innovation and investment in complementary healthcare industry and delivers safe, high quality and cost effective products to the community
- Remove the GST from complementary health products for which there is evidence to show they are as effective as PBS-listed pharmaceuticals
- Remove the GST from complementary health therapies conducted by approved therapists for which there is evidence of effectiveness
- Provide reliable public information on the safety and efficacy of complementary health care, including information software for GPs and pharmacies
- Continue to penalise poor manufacturing practice but reduce the need for costly testing, in line with the relative risk of the product
- Provide accredited therapists with access to Medicare rebates for pathology for some conditions
- Integrate complementary health training into university-based courses for conventional health care providers, particularly GPs, nurses and physiotherapists
- Provide access to HECS funding for full time students and better student access to hospitals for on-the-job training; and,
- Funding for more research into complementary health product and therapies.

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## The Issues

Research conducted in 2004 showed that 74% of the population had taken one or more vitamin, mineral, herbal or nutritional supplement in the previous 12 months. Over \$2 billion is spent annually and one in four people are using the services of a complementary medicine practitioner.

A US study in 1997 (Bendich et al) found that nearly \$20 billion in hospital charges were potentially avoidable with daily use of multivitamins containing folic acid and zinc by all women of child-bearing age and daily vitamin E supplementation for those over 50.

There is an increasing evidence-base that supports the value and efficacy of complementary health care for assisting people with a range of conditions. For example systematic reviews have found acupuncture effective in reducing nausea, vomiting and pain.

The GST applies to all complementary health products – vitamins, mineral supplements and herbal medicines and remedies. Other than the 30% private health insurance rebate that is applied to some consultations, there is no public subsidy for complementary health therapy.

Many consumers and conventional health care practitioners are not adequately informed of the economic and health benefits associated with complementary health products and services and false claims are sometimes made in relation to the benefits of some untested complementary medicines and therapies.

Australian natural health products are one of the most highly regulated in the world. Many people in the industry believe that the government agency charged with overseeing medicines is controlled by pharmaceutical interests and biased against natural healthcare imposing an inappropriate, pharmaceutical model for low risk natural health care products

An excessive and bureaucratic regulatory system has been accused of hamstringing and hobbling the industry, with high compliance costs (which have been increasing by more than 15% a year) driving businesses offshore and the high cost of getting a product or new ingredient licensed resulting in very few new products coming into Australia. This means consumers have access to a much restricted range of supplements (mostly made by large multinational corporations who can afford the high compliance costs).

There is now a remarkably diverse pattern of complementary therapy education in Australia, from short courses and degrees at private colleges through to under- and postgraduate training at universities but few courses for conventional health care providers include complementary health care.

In 2006 the Government provided \$5 million for research into complementary medicines and have established a National Institute for Complementary Medicine which will go some way to redressing the imbalance in health research funding but still leaves complementary health with less than its fair share.



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