



Australian Government

Department of Health and Aged Care

The Hon Mark Butler MP
Minister for Health and Aged Care
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I thank you for the opportunity to lead the Natural Therapies Review 2024 (the Review). It has been a rewarding experience.

Background

Since 1 April 2019, sixteen natural therapies have been excluded from the definition of private health insurance general treatment and are not eligible for the Private Health Insurance Rebate (Rebate). This decision was taken following the 2015 Review of the Government Rebate on Natural Therapies for Private Health Insurance which found there was insufficient evidence to draw definite conclusions regarding the clinical effectiveness of the therapies.

On 7 April 2019, the then Minister for Health the Hon Greg Hunt MP, announced an update of the 2015 review of natural therapies. This Natural Therapies Review (the Review) was announced as being led by the then Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Professor Brendan Murphy AC, supported by an advisory panel of experts, the Natural Therapies Review Expert Advisory Panel (NTREAP).

The Review was tasked with assessing additional available evidence for the excluded natural therapies, undertaking public consultation, and providing advice to Government on whether the excluded natural therapies should be eligible for subsidy through the Rebate.

Review process and report

In conducting the Review I have maintained the approach taken by Professor Murphy in establishing this Review, which takes account of feedback about the 2015 review. The Department of Health and Aged Care has supported a robust and transparent process. This included opportunities for stakeholder input to the design and process of the Review (3 public submission processes) and ongoing engagement throughout the Review (13 stakeholder webinars). The department again engaged the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) to undertake evidence evaluations for each of the natural therapies. These evaluations have now been completed and endorsed by the NHMRC.

My Review report reflects the results of these evaluations. Based on this report I have also provided recommendations on which therapies I support for re-inclusion as eligible for subsidy through the private health insurance rebate.

Recommendations

Given the nature of the therapies, it is difficult to achieve high certainty in the evidence due to study design limitations, such as the difficulties in using double blinding or sham/placebo in most of the therapies. I have therefore recommended re-inclusion where there is moderate certainty evidence of their clinical effectiveness for at least one health outcome in one health condition against the best available comparator where the majority of the evidence favours effectiveness. This excludes very low certainty evidence, where the reviewers' confidence was so limited that interpretation was not provided.

This is consistent with the retention of eligibility for massage following a finding in the 2015 review of moderate evidence for its short-term effectiveness for two health conditions. This also takes into account the statements in the 2015 review report regarding consideration of the overall body of evidence examined.

I recommend re-inclusion as eligible for private health insurance benefits the following natural therapies:

- Alexander Technique
- naturopathy
- Pilates
- shiatsu
- tai chi
- western herbal medicine
- yoga

I do not recommend re-including as eligible for private health insurance benefits the following natural therapies:

- aromatherapy
- Bowen therapy
- Buteyko
- Feldenkrais
- homeopathy
- iridology
- kinesiology
- reflexology
- Rolfing

Publication of Review report and evaluations

I encourage you to publish both the Review report and the appended evidence evaluations which have been based on a robust and transparent process. In conjunction with the already published research protocols underpinning conduct of the evaluations, this will enable the natural therapies sector to better utilise the research to strengthen current clinical practice and future research.

Publication may also assist with addressing stakeholder calls for further evaluation. There was a substantial workload for the independent reviewers engaged by the NHMRC to undertake the evaluations, and so these reports on individual therapies have had to be staggered. Each evaluation has a search date for evidence retrieval which range from June 2020, for Pilates, to February 2024, for kinesiology. It is possible additional evidence may have been published since these evidence retrieval dates. However, I note this Review was predicated on advice from a range of stakeholders that in 2019 evidence was already sufficient to justify reinstating the therapies.

Final words of appreciation

I have appreciated the professional and knowledgeable members of the NTREAP and the department secretariat members who have supported me in conducting this Review. The Review would not have been possible without the dedication of the NHMRC, its equally professional and knowledgeable Natural Therapies Working Committee, and the cooperation and support of a broad range of natural therapies stakeholders.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Michael Kidd', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Michael Kidd AO
Chair
Natural Therapies Review Expert Advisory Panel

16 February 2025