

Report of Cost-effectiveness of Complementary Medicines in Australia

The outcomes of a study commissioned by the National Institute of Complementary Medicine (NICM) have recently been published. It compares the costs and health benefits of complementary medicines/treatments for a range of common ailments, from depression to heart disease and back pain.

The study found cases where a complementary medicine carried a significant health benefit for a fraction of the cost of conventional treatments or where it could pose a cost effective and beneficial add-on and, overall, shows that complementary medicines could also improve the health of the healthcare system.

The research looked at:

- Acupuncture for chronic low back pain;
- St John's wort for mild to moderate depression;
- Omega-3 fish oils for the prevention of heart disease among those who have experienced myocardial infarction;
- Omega-3 fish oils to reduce non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug use in rheumatoid arthritis;
- A proprietary herbal medicine for pain and inflammation associated with osteoarthritis.

The results included:

- Acupuncture as a complement to standard care resulted in significantly better pain outcomes than standard care alone.
- St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) was found to be effective for the treatment of mild to moderate depression, offering significant savings of nearly 50 million dollars a year, based on its lower cost per unit when compared to standard anti-depressants. However, the report considered that St John's wort may need to be taken under medical supervision because, like standard antidepressants, it can interact with other drugs.
- Potential cost savings to the health system through broader use of Omega 3 fish oils as a preventative for heart disease. Where dietary changes cannot be made/ sustained, fish oil supplements were shown to be a cost effective intervention to prevent future cardiovascular mortality. However, fish oil supplements were not cost effective in reducing non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug use for rheumatoid arthritis.
- A proprietary standardised mixture of *Populus tremula* (aspen), *Fraxinus excelsior* (ash) and *Solidago virgaurea* (goldenrod or woundwort) was found to be more cost-effective than most NSAIDs in the treatment of osteoarthritis..

The full report can be found at:

http://www.nicm.edu.au/images/stories/research/docs/cost_effectiveness_cm_ae_2010.pdf

Source: CHC / IADSA