

Interacting with complementary medicines: challenging and expanding general practitioners' professional role



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With growing use by consumers there is increasing demand for general practitioners (GPs) to know about complementary medicines (CMs). This study explored GPs attitudes to the use of CMs, communication with patients about CMs and how CMs fitted with GPs' professional role.

Method

- Six focus groups with 6-8 GPs in each, were conducted in four states in 2008.
- GPs were recruited through NPS facilitators in six Divisions of General Practice: 2 in Sydney, 2 in Brisbane and 1 each in regional Victoria and Tasmania.
- Focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed and imported into NVivo8 for data organisation and thematic analysis.

Results: Core professional functions

Participants identified their core professional functions as:

- providing knowledge and education
- being responsible for patients' wellbeing
- being responsive to their patients and up-to-date

GPs reported that interacting with CMs in the professional context both challenged and expanded these three functions.



GPs as ...custodians of knowledge and educators

- Being an expert whom patients seek and take advice from was expressed in the focus groups as core to GPs professional identity.
- Being knowledgeable was often associated with science and evidence.

"...you are there to help guide the patient"
 "a lot of consumers don't have the scientific method, they don't understand that anecdotal evidence isn't really very reliable"

Challenges

- Resistance of patient to discuss CMs.
- GPs lack of knowledge about CMs.
- A lack of "scientifically valid" product information.

"Sometimes they would be embarrassed to tell you because you didn't prescribe it..."
 "...I need to know more about CM and [so] I can interact with my patients"
 "Hopefully more studies will be done and so things will be more clear of what I can tell them."

Opportunities

- Some GPs saw their role as educating patients about appropriate use of CMs and changing their "incorrect" perceptions.

"Hopefully we will have a role ... because if we understand more about it and perhaps educate our patients better about it., so that they are ... using it appropriately"

GPs as ... responsible for patients' wellbeing

- Concerns about legal responsibility and professional duty were central to the discussions.

"Patients are increasingly using complementary medicines, we can either bury our heads in the sand and say it is not really my responsibility, but it is actually medico-legally our responsibility if we are prescribing a drug as well"

Challenges

- A perceived lack of knowledge and ability to control patient's consumption of CMs limited many GPs' capacity to take responsibility for patients' CM use.

"I don't want to be taking responsibility for stuff that I don't know about"

Opportunities

- Some GPs discussed a responsibility to provide patients with a range of treatment options which are appropriate, including CMs.

"You want to find the therapy that is going to be the best for the patient"
 "... I use herbs sometimes as a placebo [when] nothing else works, the patient feels good because they have been given something to take away."

GPs as ... responsive to their patients' needs and up-to-date

- GPs found that they needed to know more about CMs in order to stay relevant and interact with their patients.

"I do feel that I need to know more about complementary medicine and so I can interact with my patients"
 "Well patients have become more aware of it [CMs], so it is our obligation to keep up."

Challenges

- GPs ability to be responsive to their patients' needs was challenged by the volume of information about CMs.
- For some GPs having to be up-to-date with CMs placed pressure on their ability to remain up-to-date with developments in conventional medicines.

"the biggest problem we have is the sheer volume of information that we try to process, in order to maintain our knowledge or expand our knowledge. ...trying to find time to do research or read up on CMs in addition to simply keeping your head above water with everything else is almost impossible."

Opportunities

- Some felt that engaging with CMs to some degree allowed GPs to remain relevant in a changing consumer environment.

"I am not a prophet but I would say in 10 years time, if you are not practicing some degree of complementary medicine you will really be by-passed."

Conclusion

GPs responded differently to the challenges and opportunities CMs placed on their core professional functions. Responses depended on the intersection of GPs perceptions of their professional role and the acceptance of complementary medicines.

Professional boundaries

Protective: Some participants who were highly protective of GP boundaries, felt that CMs sat outside the boundaries of GPs professional role and that allowing a blurring of boundaries would challenge the essence to the profession.

Support expansion: Some GPs treated CMs as a natural or important extension of their professional role.

Acceptance of CMs

Conditional: Many of the GPs were prepared to accept some CMs into their practice and professional role while excluding others. The condition of this acceptance was most often based on the level of available evidence for the product.

Limited: For some of the participants there was acceptance of CMs into only some aspects of their professional role. Many were only prepared to accept a risk minimisation role in the use of CMs by their Patients but would not include CMs as treatment options.

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