

Background

Complementary medicines include:

herbal medicines, vitamin and mineral supplements, other nutritional supplements, traditional medicines such as Ayurvedic medicines and traditional Chinese medicines, homoeopathic medicines, and aromatherapy oils (where they make therapeutic claims).

There has been an increase in the use of CMs by Australians:

In the most extensive comparative surveys undertaken to date in South Australia it was found in 1993 that 48.5% of people reported using at least one CM in the last 12 months.¹ By 2004, 52% (n=3015) of people had reported taking one CM in the past 12 months.²

Self-prescribed vitamins, herbal medicines and mineral supplements are the most common CMs used:

The South Australian studies found an increase in the use of herbal medicines from 9.9% in 1993 to 20.6% in 2004.^{1,2}

Objectives

- How do consumers use complimentary medicines?
- What kind of information about complementary medicines (CMs) participants need?
- How do consumers acquire information about their CMs?
- How participants find information about CMs
- The purpose of CMs in their lives.

Data collection method

This qualitative component was part of a multi-method investigation of CM users' information needs.

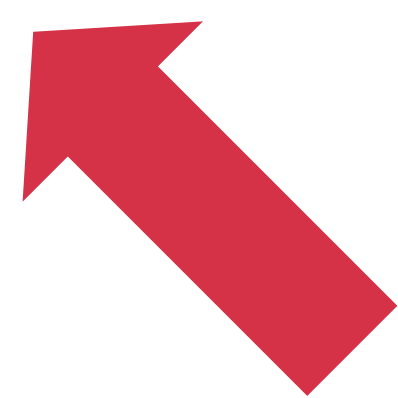
- In-depth interviews July–August 2007
- Interview technique: Sense-Making method³
- Random sample of participants from a national telephone survey (n = 24)
- Sample represented high, medium and low users of CMs who lived in two major metropolitan centres and a regional centre in Australia.

Analytical Method

Developed using Miles & Huberman⁴, Bazeley⁵

- Developing themes and categories
- Comparison of themes, intersections between themes and pattern analysis
- Using divergent views and negative cases to challenge generalisations
- Returning to the literature on complementary medicines, qualitative and multi-methods
- Creating displays to explain and deepen analysis and interpretation.

"I think that you've got to, you've really got to conduct your own clinical trial. You've got to take them over a period of time and then you make an assessment over a period of one month, 3 months and even 6 months and beyond and see when you feel better"
 (56 yr old, male, medium user)



What do consumers REALLY want to know about?

Is a complementary medicine **effective**?

How do consumers assess effectiveness?

- Cease taking them and judge the effects
- Conduct their own systematic trial (see above example)
 - Trial and error
 - Talk to people

What role does the media play?

Consumers most often referred to media sources to maintain current, general knowledge (that may not necessarily apply to them)

- Television (see example below)
- Radio
- and to a lesser extent, print media



"I think that there have been documentaries conducted in the UK about fish oils, the young kids and memory retention. I've seen a few of them"
 (57 year old, female, medium user)

The purpose of complementary medicines for consumers

Consumers described wanting information about how to enhance, support and maintain **general health and physical and mental capacity**:

- General health and/or wellbeing

"You just feel clearer and energised"
 (40 yr old, male, higher user)

- Everyday functioning

"Vitamins just get you through"
 (38 yr old, female, medium user)

- 'Back-up' or 'make up' for unhealthy behaviours

"You know that fact that if we haven't a meal with no nutrition in or had at least, you know that you've had your multivitamin or had your B Complex for the day so yeah"
 (39 yr old, male, low user)

- Support healthy regime

"That means that these are things that you would take in addition to what you would normally be eating or what normally would be prescribed for you by a Doctor. It would support your general health regime."
 (69 year old, female, medium user)

What these findings mean for information provision of complementary medicines:

Developers of consumer CM information should consider matching the delivery mechanism to the reason for CM use.

More information

There were many other findings!

For more information, contact:

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References

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- [4] Miles M, Huberman B. *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994.
- [5] Bazeley P. *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007.