

MEDIA RELEASE

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ECONOMIC RESEARCH: COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINES CAN IMPROVE HEALTH, REDUCE COSTS

New Zealand's health policy makers should take heed of Australian research findings that show some complementary medicines can contribute to improved health and reduced consumer healthcare costs, says Alison Quesnel, Executive Director of Natural Products NZ – an industry umbrella group that represents New Zealand's natural products, functional foods, complementary medicines, cosmeceuticals and nutraceuticals industries.

The Targeted Use of Complementary Medicines: Potential Health Outcomes and Cost Savings in Australia study, which was commissioned by the Australian Self Medication Industry (ASMI) and conducted by economic research firm Frost & Sullivan, concluded that health outcomes are improved and consumers' out-of-pocket costs associated with medical events are potentially reduced, when specific complementary medicines are used by high-risk target populations.¹

Ms Quesnel says the study is significant because New Zealand and Australia have similar public health challenges and there is widespread complementary medicine uptake in both countries.

“This report is timely because the growing popularity of natural products worldwide reflects a strong consumer desire for affordable health care options that complement or replace pharmaceutical products.”

Ms Quesnel said New Zealand trends would be similar to those in Australia, where seventy per cent of Australians have taken complementary medicines in the last year for general health. Almost half of users take a complementary medicine daily, particularly those aged 65 years or older (67 per cent). Two of the most popular complementary medicines are fish oils and calcium. Twenty nine percent of fish oil users take it for heart health and 71 per cent of calcium users take it for bone health.”²

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The study examined six complementary medicine regimens, all with evidence of efficacy, across four chronic disease conditions - cardiovascular disease (CVD), osteoporosis, age-related macular degeneration and depression. Three of these diseases are in the top nine National Health Priority Areas (NHPAs) that Australian governments have chosen for focused attention because of their significant contribution to the burden of illness and injury in the Australian community.

The biggest gains identified in the study are in the area of osteoporosis and osteopenia - conditions which affect 1.8 million Australians and resulted in approximately 140,822 fractures in 2012. ³

Frost & Sullivan found that the relative risk of an individual in the target population experiencing an osteoporosis-attributed fracture is reduced by 19.7% given the use of calcium and vitamin D at preventive intake levels. This translates to a potential of 36,783 avoidable osteoporosis-attributed fractures in 2015 given 100 per cent utilisation of calcium and vitamin D by the high risk population.

The report estimated that between 2015 and 2020 average annual hospitalisation costs of \$922 million can be potentially saved and average annual productivity gains of \$900 million can be realised for the same period if all women aged over 50 who were diagnosed with osteoporosis or osteopenia take a preventive dose of calcium and vitamin D. This translates to a benefit of \$22.34 for every one dollar spent on complementary medicines and over half of the savings would be realised by individual consumers.

The report also explored the burden of cardiovascular disease (CVD) on Australians and the potential health and economic benefits that can be realised if an omega-3 fatty acid regimen was used by all Australians aged 55 and over who are diagnosed with CVD.

It was estimated that the relative risk of hospitalisation due to a CVD event can be reduced by 4.9 per cent and 6,894 average annual medical events avoided between 2015 -2020 if all Australians aged over 55 with CVD were to take omega-3 fatty acids at a preventive level. The average annual benefit cost ratio from 2015 to 2020 would be \$8.49 for every dollar spent on the omega-3 fatty acids, with 60 per cent of the savings going to individual consumers.

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Ms Quesnel says the report has important implications for New Zealand's public health policy and calls upon policy makers to look at how integrating complementary and mainstream medicines can benefit the public, the health system and the health budget.

“Complementary and mainstream medicine need not be mutually exclusive; the Frost & Sullivan research demonstrates how using the best of both worlds can benefit people's health and meet a clear and growing consumer need.”

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About the Frost & Sullivan study

The Frost & Sullivan researchers conducted a review of peer-reviewed scientific literature, focusing on studies that quantified the effect of certain complementary medicines on the occurrence of disease-related events among targeted populations.

From this review, an overall change in the relative risk of a given disease-related event resulting from the use of each of the complementary regimens was derived. Then, these relative risk reduction statistics were used as an input into a cost-benefit scenario analysis to determine the potential change in hospital utilisation costs and wage income gains that could be realised if people in a specified high-risk population were to use each of the complementary medicine regimens.

[For a summary of the report click here.](#)

[For the full report click here.](#)

References

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2. Department of Health. Burden of disease: a snapshot in 2013. Department of Health, Queensland Government, Brisbane 2013. <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/epidemiology/documents/burden-disease-study.pdf>

3. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Retrieved in July 2014 at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/5206.0>

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Natural Products New Zealand (NPNZ) is a national industry organisation representing this country's natural products, functional foods, complementary medicines, cosmeceuticals and nutraceuticals industries within New Zealand and internationally.

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