



Federation of Chinese Medicine & Acupuncture Societies of Australia Ltd

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FCMA takes the Chinese medicine profession closer to inclusion in Medicare

The *Federation of Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Societies of Australia* (FCMA) approached the Minister for Health seeking greater consistency in the access of the registered professions to Medicare, DVA-funded services for veterans, and the *Chronic Disease Management* (CDM) program so as to include Chinese medicine. FCMA showed how a simple amendment to the rules and policies could ensure that consistency. The government's Chief Medical Officer and principal medical adviser to the Minister and the Department of Health, Prof Brendan Murphy, met with FCMA president Prof Tzichiang Lin, and with the director of the secretariat, Dr Sherman Gu on December 7th 2018.

Prof Murphy was not previously aware of the anomaly in legislation where, despite being recognised as an Allied Health profession in 2012, Chinese medicine was not included in the *Health Insurance Act 1973* that was amended in 2014 to include all Allied Health professions. He was very receptive to the concerns of the Chinese medicine profession and acknowledged that under the National Law and the *National Registration and Accreditation Scheme* (NRAS), only the *Chinese Medicine Board of Australia* (CMBA) has the authority to assess accreditation. Prof Murphy also expressed a personal interest in the analgesic effects of acupuncture and its potential to avoid the side-effects of opioids.

It was brought to Prof Murphy's attention that although Chinese medicine was included in the NRAS in 2012, it remains the only one of the 15 registered health professions whose practitioners are not issued with a Medicare provider number. This has resulted in a situation where registered practitioners of Chinese medicine and acupuncture are unable to provide acupuncture services funded by the *Department of Veterans' Affairs* (DVA) while endorsed acupuncturists (aka medical acupuncturists) can do so, even though they do not meet the registration standard but are simply 'endorsed' to practice acupuncture by their own board. Many veterans and their families are thus denied access to high quality acupuncture services delivered by a registered acupuncturist in the DVA system.

FCMA explained that in relation to the study of Chinese medicine and acupuncture, the training of registered practitioners of Chinese medicine and acupuncture is significantly more extensive than that of endorsed acupuncturists (GPs) in terms of hours of training, in knowledge and in clinical competence. Because Chinese medicine services (including acupuncture) are excluded from the Medicare system, there is no central administration system for Chinese medicine and acupuncture claims. This necessitates a system which results in some registered Chinese medicine practitioners having difficulty in finding health provider recognition.

Government statistics show there are only 592 endorsed acupuncturists in Australia to service 283,942 veterans and their families, of whom 193,968 are DVA Gold or White card holders. That disparity is too great to allow the needs of the community to be met. Australia currently has 4,784 registered acupuncturists and the government should make full use of this existing resource of health professionals and at the same time benefit from both the cost advantages and the unique clinical effects of traditional Chinese medicine acupuncture in the management of chronic disease.

The first and fundamental request is for **the issue of a Medicare number** to every registered practitioner of Chinese medicine. This would allow the inclusion of registered acupuncturists in DVA-funded services, and also avert the imposition by some health insurers of provider recognition criteria that are not aligned with the registration standard. The second stage would be the inclusion of acupuncture services provided by registered acupuncturists in the CDM plan. Currently, endorsed acupuncturists (GPs who do not meet the registration standard set by CMBA but are endorsed by their own board) are included in the DVA scheme but the services of registered acupuncturists and Chinese medicine practitioners are excluded. Eventually, it is envisioned that registered acupuncturists will be accorded the same acupuncture cover as endorsed acupuncturists under the Medicare system. (In the 2018 financial year, Medicare expenditure on rebates for acupuncture services performed by endorsed acupuncturists was as high as \$23,811,136, and the average earned in acupuncture fees for each endorsed acupuncturist exceeded \$40,000 per practitioner.)



From left: Prof Tzi Chiang Lin, Prof Brendan Murphy, Dr Sherman Gu

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