

PRESS RELEASE

Falling Behind: Why Australia Trails the US and UK in Supporting and Integrating TCM

Small businesses are struggling as Australian acupuncturists and TCM practitioners face significant financial challenges.

Australia, November 2024 – As the Australian healthcare system grapples with unprecedented demand, nearly 5,000 registered Acupuncturists and TCM Practitioners find themselves marginalised and financially strained.

According to a recent KPMG report commissioned by the Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association (AACMA), Australia's leading TCM organisation, the profession and its practitioners are being excluded from critical government support schemes and denied integration into the health landscape. Despite being a registered profession, the Government's disregard for these health professionals hinders their ability to practice to their full scope, thus limiting their earning capacity while also reducing treatment choices for the health-consuming public.

Chinese medicine practitioners have been registered under the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) since 2012, a system designed to ensure high-quality standards across 16 health professions. Despite this, the Australian government continues to restrict their ability to practice to their full scope, limiting healthcare choices for the public and exacerbating financial challenges for these small business owners.

Economic Contributions and Disparities

TCM services, including acupuncture and herbal medicine, **contributed \$703 million** to the Australian economy in the 2023 financial year. While the overall consumption of these services has seen a decline, acupuncture services have maintained steady revenue, highlighting their continued relevance and potential for growth. However, according to the National Health Workforce Survey (NHWS) 2020, a staggering 63.8% of registered TCM practitioners operate as sole traders, and 23.5% are in small group practices with fewer than ten practitioners. These small businesses face significant financial hurdles, with the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman reporting that 43% of small businesses fail to make a profit, and 75% of small business owners earn less than the average wage.

"Chinese medicine practitioners are a crucial part of our healthcare system, yet they are consistently overlooked by the government," said Waveny Holland, President of the Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association (AACMA). "These practitioners are highly trained professionals who provide essential services to both urban and rural communities, but they are denied the same opportunities afforded to other healthcare providers."

A Call for Fair Integration

Despite their extensive training, the exclusion of registered Chinese medicine practitioners from the Medicare Benefits Scheme is a glaring anomaly. While general practitioners can perform acupuncture with as little as 120-260 hours of training, TCM Acupuncturists, who undergo a four-year bachelor's degree with up to 1,000 hours of clinical practice, are denied access to the same government support.

"The government's refusal to integrate TCM into the broader healthcare system is not only a disservice to these practitioners but also to the public who deserve access to a full range of healthcare options," continued Holland. "It's time for the government to recognise the value these practitioners bring to our economy and our health system."

Precedents from other countries further emphasise the disparity in Australia. In the United States, the Department of Veterans Affairs and Medicare both include acupuncture in their health management plans. Similarly, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) provides acupuncture treatments under specific guidelines. These examples highlight the need for Australia to reevaluate its stance on including TCM within its healthcare framework.

"Our practitioners are not asking for special treatment; they are asking for fair treatment," added Holland. "The evidence supporting the effectiveness of Chinese medicine is robust, and it's time for the Australian government to act on it."

What Does This Mean for Everyday Australians?

For the everyday Australian, the challenges faced by TCM practitioners translate into fewer options for holistic, natural healthcare. With the government limiting these practitioners' ability to fully operate, **Australians are denied access to a comprehensive range of treatments** that could complement conventional medicine, especially in areas like pain management, mental health, and chronic illness support.

"As Australians continue to seek out more natural and integrative healthcare options, the exclusion of TCM practitioners from essential support systems means that people are left with fewer choices," Holland explained. "This not only impacts those who rely on these services for their well-being but also adds further strain to our already overburdened healthcare system."

The ripple effect of these financial and regulatory challenges extends beyond individual patients to the broader community. Reduced access to qualified practitioners, particularly in rural and remote areas, **can lead to increased healthcare costs, longer waiting times, and greater reliance on pharmaceuticals**, which may not always be the best or preferred option for patients.

Looking Forward

The AACMA has presented an independent economic value report by KPMG to the Australian government, outlining the significant contributions of Chinese medicine to the economy and the potential benefits of a more integrated healthcare system. The association calls on the government to consider the broader implications of their current policies and to take action to support the nearly



5,000 registered Chinese medicine practitioners who are vital to the health and well-being of Australians.

"An integrated healthcare system that includes Chinese medicine will not only provide Australians with more choices but will also alleviate some of the pressures on our overwhelmed healthcare system," concluded Holland. "It's time for the government to stop ignoring this essential cohort of health professionals and to start supporting their ability to practice to their full scope."

Interviews with Waveny Holland, President of AACMA are available on request. Please contact Amanda Kuhn – amanda@missymischief.com – 0410 570 993.

About AACMA

The Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association (AACMA) is Australia's leading professional organisation dedicated to Chinese medicine practitioners, including acupuncturists, Chinese herbalists, Chinese herbal dispensers, and traditional remedial massage practitioners. AACMA is committed to supporting its members and advancing the acupuncture and Chinese medicine profession. The association advocates for safety, quality, and ethical practice standards, with its members registered with the Chinese Medicine Board of Australia and adhering to rigorous codes, practices, and guidelines. Information on membership can be found under the Membership tab. Over the past five decades, AACMA has significantly enhanced the recognition and efficacy of the TCM profession in Australia. Through strategic promotion, robust research, and comprehensive education programs, AACMA has elevated Chinese medicine's status and its acceptance as an integral component of the mainstream health system in Australia.

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