

The National Institute of Complementary Medicine: The Birth of a National Initiative

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The Federal Government has acknowledged the increasing importance of complementary medicine (CM) in Australia by establishing the National Institute of Complementary Medicine (NICM) on 15 June 2007 with a \$4 million grant. The New South Wales Office of Science and Medical Research has supported the establishment of the Institute with a further \$600 000. This latest government initiative supplements the announcement in December last year of \$5 million in National Health and Medical Research Council Special Initiative Research Grants for complementary medicines.

NICM WILL HELP FACILITATE AND CO-ORDINATE RESEARCH

'Preventative healthcare' and 'ageing well' are national research priorities and with substantial numbers of Australians using CM, we need to understand to what extent it can make a significant, cost-effective contribution to public health. NICM will build on existing expertise in CM research, foster collaborations and developing programs that build links across the sector and build human capacity in the field. It will be the vehicle for developing critical mass and shared infrastructure, establishing research priorities and gaining international recognition for Australian research activities in this important and growing field.

NICM is hosted at the University of Western Sydney, Campbelltown Campus and its core aims are to:

- Articulate national priorities in CM research, both basic and translational;
- Co-ordinate national collaboration across research themes and activities;
- Support capacity building through post-doctoral training – creating research workers able to support the industry's research needs as it expands nationally and internationally;
- Disseminate research findings to medical and health practitioners and the general public.

PROGRESS

NICM has moved quickly to establish its organisation and to map out its strategy for the future. An interim management team has been established comprising of the Director Professor Alan Bensoussan, CEO Shelley Evans, Executive Officer Dr Phillip Cheras, Project Officer Ros Priest and Administrative Officer Natalie McCarthy. This team has broad expertise across the CM sector in addition to general management, marketing and communications skills. The management team is advised by an interim Consultative Group comprising Professor Stephen P Myers (Southern Cross University), Suzanne Pierce (NSW Office of Science & Medical Research), Professor Basil Roufogalis (University of Sydney) and Professor Marc Cohen (RMIT). An Interim Advisory Panel with

expertise in organisational structures and strategic planning, business, finance, major research institutes and CM has also been established. Further information on NICM background and activities is available on our recently established website: www.nicm.edu.au.

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

NICM has recognised the importance of stakeholder involvement throughout its development. To this end, three major stakeholder forums were convened in Sydney to focus on issues of importance to CM researchers, the CM industry and practitioners. These forums canvassed opinions on the major issues relevant to NICM's core areas of activity and the means by which NICM could begin to address these. The outcomes from these forums have been incorporated into NICM's implementation plan which aims to establish NICM as a long-term, financially viable Institute.

FUNDING CALL

NICM has developed its funding policy and recently announced a funding call for the establishment of the first NICM Collaborative Research Centres with an allocation of \$1.8 million. The aim of the NICM Centre Funding Program is to provide funding for the establishment over a two-year period of three or four NICM Centres to pursue collaborative research on themes that address NICM

research priorities. The support will contribute to personnel costs. It is expected that NICM Collaborative Centres will:

- contribute new knowledge at a leading international level that falls within NICM Research Priorities;
- leverage NICM funds to maximise the amount of CM research being conducted in Australia;
- promote inter-disciplinary research integrating CM and other disciplines, in particular mainstream disciplines such as conventional medicine;
- increase the breadth and depth of CM research capacity in Australia; and
- promote the strategic distribution of funds being applied to CM research to maximise the overall benefit of CM research in Australia.

IMPORTANCE OF NICM FOR CHINESE MEDICINE RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIA

The NICM Call for Funding for Collaborative Centres represents a unique opportunity for traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) to establish itself strongly in Australia. For too long individual researchers and relatively small research teams have worked

independently and competed against each other for the small quantum of research funding available in the field. If the TCM community were successful in establishing a national Collaborative Centre in TCM under this funding scheme, this co-ordinated centre would provide a support vehicle for careful prioritising and planning of TCM research in Australia. Collaboration will mean that infrastructure may be accessed and shared without duplication. We may invest in further human capacity building to grow the number and quality of active TCM researchers and develop strong, multi-disciplinary research teams. Overall, an NICM Collaborative Centre in TCM would represent a major facelift (an analogy of potential interest to our ageing population) to TCM research and importantly, generate greater visibility of TCM through convincing evidence of its effectiveness, safety and cost-effectiveness.

HOW CAN THE CHINESE MEDICINE COMMUNITY BECOME INVOLVED AND HELP?

At the stakeholder forums, interest was frequently expressed by practitioners

to become involved in NICM research activities. NICM welcomes the opportunity to include Chinese medicine and other health practitioners in its database by registering through our website. This will enable us to send them our e-newsletter, which provides regular updates on NICM's activities. Practitioners could potentially participate in clinical trials as associate investigators, provide appropriately screened participants or even participate more actively through a post-graduate research training program. This call to establish National Collaborative Centres is competitive. There is no guarantee that a TCM application would be successful. The broader Chinese medicine community should actively seek to support the establishment of a National Collaborative Centre in TCM in all ways imaginable. The application deadline is 20 December 2007. This is a unique opportunity that has never been previously available to Chinese medicine and deserves the strongest support possible.