

Holistic approach best for the blues

The role of natural remedies in treating depression is gaining recognition from mainstream health authorities, as **Cliff Taylor** reports

Natural health practitioners, such as naturopaths and herbalists, firmly believe in the benefits of traditional medicines and alternative treatments for patients suffering from depression, and the Ministry of Health lists many of these treatments on its website www.depression.org.nz.

The ministry's table of common alternative treatments is divided into three categories. St John's wort, light therapy, exercise and self-help books involving cognitive behaviour therapy are all listed under "Strong Evidence".

The "Some Evidence" category includes acupuncture, fish oil, massage, relaxation therapy and yoga, while ginseng, lemon balm, vervain, colour therapy, chocolate and prayer are lumped into the "Lack of Evidence" category.

"For people whose depression or anxiety is not severe or life-threatening, there are a lot of options that can be tried and may be helpful in managing depression, or preventing it getting worse," the website states.

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— ROBYN CARRUTHERS

However, the ministry guidelines also warn about the dangers of self-medicating.

"A lot of people self-medicate by using alcohol and other drugs and this approach tends to make the depression worse. And some of the across-the-counter remedies, such as St John's wort, can interact with other common drugs, so you should check with your doctor before taking them."

Collaboration with doctors crucial

It is an approach supported by naturopath and medical herbalist Robyn Carruthers, deputy director of clinical and research at the South Pacific College of Natural Medicine in Auckland.

Clients she treats for depression are often already on antidepressants, but wanting to move off them. However, there are "incredibly strict



Several natural products for depression have a strong evidence base

protocols" about this process, she says, and everything has to be done in collaboration with the patient's doctor.

"We never, never take people off their medication," Ms Carruthers says. "We need to have a conversation with the doctor. If the doctor is happy for the patient to reduce their medication we can support that."

She is reluctant to recom-

mend specific treatments, but says St John's wort has proved to be effective against depression. "It works in the same way as an SSRI [selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor], so you have to be very careful about combining the two, to avoid that interaction," she stresses.

There is a "misconception" about natural health practitioners that they will "just give someone something for depression", she explains. The reality is, naturopaths take a more holistic approach and will talk to clients at length before recommending treatment.

There may be underlying issues with diet, lack of vitamins and nutrients, and lifestyle which exacerbate depression.

She has noticed an increase in people seeking help for depression and believes people feel more able to talk about it

than in the past. However, she is concerned about the level of medication being prescribed – even to people who are simply going through the natural process of grieving.

"I have difficulty understanding that. What staggers me is the number of people on antidepressants. Sometimes these drugs are hellishly difficult to get off."

Medical advisor and researcher Shaun Holt of Victoria University says only around a third of people with major depression respond well to antidepressant medications.

"Studies show that, as some natural therapies work just as well or even better than antidepressant medications in some people and can have fewer side effects, they are potentially a better choice for many people with depression or can be taken in addition to antidepressants," Professor Holt says.

Natural health supplements with the best evidence of effectiveness are omega-3, St John's wort, folate, B vitamins and S-adenosyl methionine, he says.

Pharmacy key player in advising patients

Ms Carruthers believes closer collaboration between different healthcare professionals would help in dealing with depression.

"I would like to see far more cooperation between doctors, pharmacists and natural health practitioners. I understand how pharmacists have

placed themselves in providing advice about natural products – they are clearly in a very good position to do that. I'm pleased a lot of pharmacies are putting naturopaths on the shop floor. It's great."

But she feels her own profession has been "misunderstood and under-represented" in the past.

"My preference is for people to go through the process of having a natural health consultation. We [naturopaths] have 2000 years of using herbs, so we know they are effective. There is a huge contribution we can make." CT

Natural health products regulations draw closer

MICHELLE NORTON

The submission phase for natural health product regulations in New Zealand is expected to open this month.

The Natural Health and Supplementary Products Bill, which the Ministry of Health anticipates will be law by May next year, is designed to create regulations for the manufacturing and selling of natural health products. It is currently awaiting its third reading in Parliament.

The submission phase is for the ministry to gather feedback on the proposed ingredients list, the claims which natural health manufacturers can make about their products and how much evidence they have to provide when registering a product, Ministry of Health regulations manager Donald Hannah said at a 20 August meeting with natural health products industry representatives, which *Pharmacy Today* attended.

The ministry is looking at the lists of accepted ingredients for natural health products in Australia and Canada to help inform what should be on the New Zealand list. Progress on the bill has slowed slightly, as it took a backseat to the development of the Psychoactive Substances Act, Mr Hannah says.

Natural Products New Zealand executive director Alison Quesnel says the industry eagerly awaits the law. It will give natural health product companies, and stockists of the products, such as pharmacies, the confidence to say the products do what they claim to.

This will also help New Zealand manufacturers to export natural health products because other countries will have more confidence in their claims.

Natural health companies will have a chance to trial the web-based registration system, before it is rolled out under the new law. Consumers will also be able to access the system, where they will be able to search products by their name, view the claims made about a particular product and the evidence to substantiate the claims.

However, at this stage the natural health products companies will likely have a "grace" period of one to three years, following the act coming into force, to ensure all their products comply with the regulations.

Mr Hannah repeats the ministry's earlier point that at this stage the natural health regulations will not become part of the Australia New Zealand Therapeutics Agency. But, it will review both regulatory systems in 2016, when ANZTPA is expected to be fully phased in, to see whether it is effective to have dual regulations. MN



Alison Quesnel

Holt launches supplements range

KEIRA STEPHENSON

A GP and pharmacist-backed supplements range, aimed at taking the difficulty out of choosing which products to recommend, is hitting the market.

The idea is to manufacture a very small range of supplements, in optimum doses, which are supported by strong clinical evidence, medical research, Shaun Holt says.

Unlike some companies which can have between 50 and 100 products in their range, Professor Holt is planning only five: a multi-vitamin, ginger, glucosamine for arthritis, fish oil and a probiotic.

Professor Holt admits some GPs he approached were uncomfortable with the idea of recommending a specific brand, due to worries about a conflict of interest.

Taking this on board, he decided to run Evidence-based Supplements as a not-for-profit.

Neither Professor Holt as director or any of the other board members will be taking a salary from the company. Instead any profits will be donated to medical charities chosen by the board. Everyone else in the chain from manufacturers to distributors and retailers



Shaun Holt

will be paid as usual, but other companies, such as financial advisors Deloitte, will donate their services for free or at a reduced rate.

The board is made up completely of New Zealand doctors and pharmacists, which, Professor Holt says means GPs and pharmacists can have confidence in recommending the products, because medical professionals have put their name to it.

The supplements will come in clinically tested doses, which is good for GPs, pharmacists and patients, he says. KS