

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Budget Estimates 2018 - 2019, 29 & 30 May 2018

Ref No: SQ18-000699

OUTCOME: 1 - Health System Policy, Design and Innovation

Topic: Homeopathy Review

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Senator: Stirling Griff

Question:

The Homeopathy Review adopted the ‘Overview’ method from the Cochrane Handbook, which states that Overviews are intended primarily for summarising the results of Cochrane systematic reviews and may sometimes be used where good quality systematic reviews have been published and a Cochrane review is not available. The reviewer (Optum) rated 50 out of the 57 systematic reviews identified as not meeting the minimum quality requirement specified by the Cochrane Overview method. Given this core deficiency, why were no original studies retrieved and assessed, in line with established NHMRC best practice in reviewing evidence?

Answer:

Many systematic reviews examining the effectiveness of homeopathy had already been published. Rather than searching for all individual published studies of homeopathy, NHMRC commissioned Optum to utilise these existing reviews. The advantage of this strategy is that it made use of the large amount of work that had already been done by researchers around the world in finding and assessing studies, and it provided an overarching picture of the whole body of evidence.

This strategy is in line with one of the various purposes of conducting an overview as it relies on the information provided in the systematic reviews. As per the Cochrane Handbook, the authors of the Overview should present their conclusion, which may include an assessment of the limitation of those reviews, not simply restate the conclusions of the included systematic review. In the instance of the Homeopathy Review, Optum considered the quality of each of the included studies using the information provided by the systematic reviews as a way of identifying the body of evidence for homeopathic treatments.

At the time of drafting the Overview, no “minimum quality requirement” was specified in the Cochrane Handbook¹. However Optum provided detail on the quality of the systematic reviews in the Overview Report and how the studies they included were considered. This process had some limitations as well as strengths, as outlined in the section “Limitations of the assessment and evidence base for homeopathy” in the NHMRC Information Paper.

¹ Cochrane Handbook for Systematic reviews of Interventions, edited Julian Higgins and Sally Green. Wiley - Blackwell (2008)