

5 minutes with... Andy McLintock

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In 5 minutes with ...

Andy discusses a recent research project that is exploring how healthcare practitioners are integrating Complementary medicine into the veteran population who are living with chronic pain.

Andy's details ...

Naturopath, Veteran and Research assistant

What is the research project you're currently working on? The research project we are currently working on is looking at how integrating complementary medicine into the veteran population living with chronic pain. This is a first study that I know of in Australia where we are integrating Complementary Medicine including Naturopathy, yoga, acupuncture and massage into a whole sweep of therapies currently available to veterans with a focus on chronic pain.

What type of study is this? It is a pragmatic RCT for veterans with chronic pain. They are either allocated the control group, which is conventional therapy funded by Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) currently available to them. This includes doctors, exercise physiology, psychologists, dietetics which are available to them. The intervention group includes all the therapies I've just mentioned plus the Complementary Medicine modalities. The participants are on this journey for 6 months and at 8, 12 and 26 weeks, I ask them to fill out surveys to track progress. It's a pilot study funded through the Defence Health Foundation with Academics from

Southern Cross University and UTS. The intent is to see what happens when we have integrative approaches to veteran's health and what health outcomes are achieved, is it cost effective? It's really a starting point on how we can integrate Complementary Medicine into the veteran population here in Australia. That sort of integration is done quite a lot already, particularly in America and Europe, for massage, acupuncture, meditation. For us to include Naturopathy it is a bit different to the other countries with a different CM focus.

It's exciting to see what the outcomes will be. I've been conscious not to look at any results per se so far, but anecdotally most people in the intervention group have had good health outcomes so far which is great.

You could switch that around and say well they're getting more things so you can actually get a better outcome but really it's a scoping study and a more refined approach about how we do will come in the future.

I'd imagine with the focus on the particular symptom of pain, this is going to be potentially helpful for so many veterans? Yes, that's a common thread I see in the research across the world in veteran's health. Chronic pain is quite prevalent, so by focusing on that I think it's a good starting point. It is often hard in any kind of research and funding, you need to be quite tailored, so saying something is good for general well-being is a bit too broad. Focusing on something that is a bit more targeted that we know would have some good outcomes, make sense and in a lot of these instances general well-being will be taken care of through dealing with that pain. They're going sleep better, feel better mentally.

Conventional therapies are all very good at targeted approaches to certain aspects and similar with integrative Complementary Medicine, often targeted with supplements that might be good for a particular condition, along with general holistic well-being approaches such as lifestyle and diet which is also beneficial.

What led you to being a part of this research project? For me, there are two parts two it, I'm a veteran myself, and I've been in the army for 15 years now. I personally don't have any kind of lived experiences of chronic pain but it is quite prevalent out there. I wanted to focus my research on veterans health, I really feel I can value add with that. Putting my Naturopath cap on I definitely found once I left college and when I got out there, I more enjoyed the research route vs the clinical route. That was my focus to build the evidence base around this area.

How did you get into research? It started before I finished college, I was quite curious about research. I remember reaching out to academics to get myself involved. I was lucky when I finished college, I became a casual research assistant with UTS in order to support this veteran study. For anyone interested in research, it is about reaching out, asking questions and getting support where you can.

I'm back working back in the army while doing research on the side. I might do some further postgraduate work in the veterans' health environment and see where that takes me.

Once the research is in, what do you see? For the future, I think it will lead to greater integration of Complementary Medicine into the Australian veteran population whether through similar studies or more refined approached.

Also to investigate at new veteran centric studies on different injuries, conditions, parts of the population, improving performance, sleep will be great. It is all about building that evidence base.

Are you aware of many practitioners supporting war veterans? I am aware of a small number of practitioners supporting veterans. I'd like to do a survey in the future on military people to understand their complementary medicine use from a supplement, product centric, as well as a therapy perspective so we can better understand it. Similar has been done overseas. It's about starting the conversation about Complementary Medicine use.

Thanks Andy for sharing about this project, in good timing, we look forward to hearing the results, and for future support of the veteran community with complementary medicine.