

## LETTER

**Is delayed regulation of yoga and naturopathic medicine in India breeding quackery?**

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The combined discipline of Yoga & Naturopathy (Y&N) constitutes one of the official indigenous medical systems under the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa-Rigpa, and Homoeopathy (AYUSH), Government of India (GoI). The GoI has recently regulated all the systems under AYUSH, except Yoga & Naturopathy, through the National Commission for Indian System of Medicine (NCISM) Bill, 2020 [1]. However, Y&N has been left out from the NCISM Bill, despite the recommendations of the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on the National Commission for Indian System of Medicine Bill, 2019 [2: p 20], and NITI Aayog [3: p 15]. On the contrary, GoI has proposed a board for regulating Y&N without defining its statutory value or timeline.

Currently, there are 56 Y&N medical colleges spread across different states, affiliated to their respective state-run medical universities, offering five-and-a-half year Bachelors' medical degree in Y&N (BNYS), as well as three-year Doctor of Medicine (MD) programmes in Y&N, which are recognised by the University Grants Commission [4, 5]. BNYS doctors are registered as Class 'A' medical practitioners in nearly 20 states of India and are employed as physicians in state-run clinical facilities [6]. GoI has also acknowledged that only BNYS graduates are eligible to be registered as Y&N doctors [6]. Y&N physicians' services are widely used in treating diseases ranging from obesity to Covid-19 in India. Given the popularity of Y&N, supported by the government's initiative to mainstream traditional medicine, the lack of regulation has led to mushrooming of non-recognised courses and self-proclaimed doctors, thereby endangering the health and lives of patients. Petitions against such quack practitioners, courses and complications inflicted by them are widely reported [7, 8]. Delaying the regulation of Y&N can only lead to more confusion and will serve as fertile ground for quackery.

Globally, Naturopathy is an umbrella term used for all the alternative systems of medicine that include yoga, acupuncture, acupressure, homoeopathy, ayurveda, Tai chi, etc. Currently, 98 countries are reported to have active Naturopathy practitioners, with the largest proportion in North America. Naturopathy is well regulated in Canada, the United States, the Virgin Islands, etc [9, 10]. According to the

World Naturopathic Federation, regulation of naturopathic practice in these countries has helped both government and practitioners to determine the scope of practice, enhance academic standards, provide accreditation and prevent potential harm to patients [9].

These reforms are seen even in those Indian states with well-regulated statutory mechanisms for Y&N, such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, which exhibit significant growth in inter-disciplinary referrals and peoples' acceptance of Y&N [11]. In addition, they pave the way to inclusion of Y&N in insurance schemes; upscale the accreditation process with reputed agencies like the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers, and Central Government health schemes; and ensure patient safety by doing away with unwarranted/unethical medical practice. This warrants expansion of such regulation beyond these states.

With the rapid expansion of the beneficiary base of Y&N, it is GoI's moral responsibility to regulate Y&N under the existing NCISM Bill, as originally recommended by the Parliamentary Standing Committee and NITI Aayog, or to create a separate law for their regulation at the earliest. Denying quality treatment by qualified practitioners to the public is ethically incorrect and even dangerous. Similarly, it is an injustice to rigorously trained and highly qualified practitioners in Y&N from nationally instituted medical universities not to establish professional standards through regulation. Medical regulation of Y&N is thus essential to safeguard the rights and interests of patients as well as practitioners.

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