

NATUROPATHIC MEDICINE

Naturopathic medicine is a system of health care first developed in the late 1890's which emphasizes the natural self-healing processes of the human body. Central principles include using healing approaches which derive from nature, encouraging self-responsibility for health, and treatment which takes into account the whole person. A naturopathic physician typically combines several modalities, including herbal medicine, to prevent illness, treat disease, and promote well-being.

History

Naturopathy evolved as a widely practiced comprehensive health system in the early 1900's, drawing mainly from European herbal and water therapy traditions. It increased in popularity in the United States until the 1940's, waned in popularity during the '50's and '60's, and has experienced a resurgence since then.

Since the 1990's, there have been concerted efforts towards more formalized, more standardized training and wider licensure, with greater attention paid to the importance of research in the field. In the U.S., there are currently more than 1000 licensed naturopathic physicians. Naturopathy is also practiced widely in Canada, Germany, England, and Australia.

Philosophy of Practice

Principles central to the practice of naturopathy include:

1. The healing power of nature. Recognize the body's inherent ability to heal itself, and the naturopathic physician's role in facilitating and enhancing self-healing.
2. Importance of minimizing harmful side effects of treatment. Whenever possible choose gentler, less strong, therapeutic options.
3. Awareness that suppressing symptoms alone may sometimes get in the way of discovering the cause of a disease.
4. Self-responsibility. The role of the naturopathic physician is to educate and encourage individuals to take responsibility for their own care.
5. Whole person. Naturopathic physicians strive to take into account all aspects of their patients' health including emotional, social, and spiritual aspects.

Scope of Practice

Diagnostic Methods

Naturopathic physicians perform a history and a physical exam, order lab tests, and record findings using a “SOAP” format, in very similar ways to that of conventional medicine practitioners. A typical visit with a new patient will last one hour, and return visits typically range between 30 and 45 minutes.

Naturopathic physicians order many of the same lab tests as conventional practitioners, such as a CBC, TSH, or LFT’s, but in addition may also order some lab tests which are unfamiliar to conventional physicians, such as stool analysis for GI enzyme levels and salivary hormone panels. Radiology studies, such as mammograms, may be ordered, and Pap smears are commonly performed.

Treatment methods

Naturopathic physicians typically combine several treatment modalities in their practice. The modalities employed usually include: herbal medicine and the use of other dietary supplements, modifications of diet and other lifestyle changes, hydrotherapy, naturopathic physical manipulation, and homeopathy. Those who also have received training in Traditional Chinese Herbal Medicine or acupuncture may use these methods as well. Most naturopathic practitioners have a small dispensary for herbs and other supplements in their office of products which they feel are of sufficiently high quality. Such dispensing accounts for up to 40% of some provider’s revenue.

In 13 states naturopathic physicians are licensed as primary care practitioners and in 8 states are given the authority to write prescriptions for some medications. Washington State is one of 3 states in the U.S. with a wide formulary for naturopathic physicians. This formulary includes drugs which are considered to have natural sources such as colchicine, ergots, estrogens, glucocorticoids, lithium, thyroid preparations, and selected antibiotics. Oregon and Arizona also have wide formularies. The Oregon formulary also includes drugs such as statins, warfarin, and metformin, as well as the recent addition of schedule II opiates.

Most naturopathic physicians view themselves as general practitioners and would not hesitate to refer patients for conventional medical care if they felt that the patient's need was beyond their scope of practice.

Training

There are currently only a small number of schools in the country which offer accredited programs towards a Doctorate in Naturopathic Medicine (ND). The two largest are Bastyr University in Seattle and the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland. The four year curricula at these schools are similar in many ways to

conventional medical schools, beginning with a wide range of courses in basic science and normal physiology and ending with clinical rotations. Tuition at these schools tends to be high, and students often graduate with significant debt.

Since 1999, a national licensing exam termed NPLEX (Naturopathic Physicians Licensing Exam) has been administered in two parts. This exam is modeled closely after conventional medicine's USMLE Steps 1 and 2.

Most graduates go directly from one of these programs into practice, but a few go on to receive additional residency training, typically lasting one year. These residency slots are generally in short supply and tend to be very competitive, accepting top students who are interested in pursuing additional clinical training. Bastyr offers 6 spots per year which are open to a graduating class of 90-100.

There are, in addition, numerous non-standardized education programs in the U.S. which provide training in "naturopathy". They vary tremendously in length and scope. Many offer correspondence or online courses only. Graduates from these programs are not eligible to take the NPLEX examination, or to obtain licenses to practice naturopathic medicine in states that offer such licenses.

Licensure and Regulation

As of October 2004, thirteen states licensed naturopathic physicians: Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Kansas, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, and Washington. Although not officially regulated, legal provisions allow the practice of naturopathic medicine in several other states.

States with licensure laws require an ND degree from an accredited school and a passing score on both parts of the NPLEX exam. Some states, such as Utah, also require one year of post-graduate residency training.

Insurance Coverage

In general, health insurers around the country do not cover services provided by a naturopathic physician. In 1996, however, the state legislature of Washington required insurance carriers in the state to provide some coverage for "all licensed healthcare providers", including ND's. Group Health has responded by offering very limited coverage, whereas Regence Blue Shield allows clients to choose a naturopathic physician as their primary care provider. The State of Connecticut has a similar law, whereas Oregon, another state in the U.S. with a large number of licensed ND's, does not have such a law.

Scientific Basis for Naturopathic Medicine

There is a small but growing body of scientific research into the clinical effectiveness of naturopathic medicine and the modalities commonly used in naturopathic medicine. Much of the clinical practice of naturopathic medicine is based on traditional empirical evidence, expert opinion, current best practice, and individual therapeutic trials. There is growing interest and resources available to conduct clinical research in naturopathic medicine. Due to the individualized treatment approaches and multiplicity of therapeutic agents used in treating patients, however, designing rigorous clinical trials is challenging.

How to Find a Reliable Naturopathic Physician

The following increase the odds that a naturopathic physician will provide high quality care: degree from an accredited, four year doctoral naturopathic medicine program, completion of at least one year of post-graduate residency training, current license to practice in the state of residence, no pending disciplinary issues with the state board responsible for naturopathic physicians, and able to provide a list of local healthcare providers (conventional and CAM) with whom they work who could be contacted to provide a reference.

The American Association of Naturopathic Physicians has a national “Find an ND” service available free on their website for patients. All physicians listed on that site must be graduates of accredited, four-year doctoral programs.

References/Resources

Hough H, Dower C and O’Neil E. Profile of a Profession: Naturopathic Practice. San Francisco, CA: Center for the Health Professions, University of California, San Francisco. 2001.

American Association of Naturopathic Physicians website – www.naturopathic.org

Bastyr University catalog – 2002-2003 – www.bastyr.edu