History Of Naturopathic Medicine

By Michelle Ferchoff

Naturopathic medicine is a system of medicine used for the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of human disease and impairment. It stresses health maintenance, disease prevention, patient education, and patient responsibilities and emphasizes the treatment of the whole person rather than treatment of disease symptoms. Naturopathic medicine is identified by — Vis Medicatrix Naturae, “the healing power of nature.” Fundamental to this belief is a deep confidence in the ability of the body and mind to heal itself. Naturopathic physicians help remove the obstacles to cure and employ natural therapies that strengthen and stimulate each person’s own healing processes.

Naturopathic medicine developed from the alternative healing systems that were practiced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this time period, the two competing philosophies of medicine, vitalistic (now called natural medicine) and mechanistic (now called allopathic or conventional medicine), diverged and converged, influencing and shaping one another.

Dr. Benedict Lust is considered the father of naturopathy. In 1902, he founded the American School of Naturopathy. From 1900 to 1917, various forms of natural medicine were combined into one eclectic system. Diet, hygiene, hydrotherapy, spinal manipulation, mental and emotional healing, Thompsonian/ eclectic (botanical/herbal medicine), and homeopathic systems of natural healing were all merged into naturopathy.

From 1918 to 1937, great public interest and support for naturopathic medicine emerged. In the early 1920s, naturopathic movement reached its peak in terms of public awareness and interest. Practitioners of a variety of medical disciplines combined natural therapeutics in a way that hadn’t been done before, and joined together to form the first naturopathic professional medical societies. Naturopathic medical conventions in the 1920’s attracted more than 10,000 practitioners. During this time, there were more than 20 naturopathic medical colleges, and naturopathic physicians were licensed in a majority of the States.

From 1938 to 1970, the growing political and social dominance of allopathic medicine, fueled by the drug industry’s financial backing, led to the legal and economic suppression of naturopathic healing. Public infatuation with technology, introduction of “miracle drugs,” the development of surgery and other high-tech medical interventions, the growing political power and sophistication of the AMA, and the death of Benedict Lust caused the decline of naturopathic medicine and natural healing in the United States.

With the AMA’s new political power, they were able to not only get more restrictive medical practice laws passed but were also successful in getting many state naturopathic licensure laws repealed. With these political developments, the courts began to take the view that naturopathic physicians were not true doctors. Lack of insurance coverage, lost court battles, and a hostile legislative perspective progressively restricted practices and eliminated funding for naturopathic education.

In the late 1960s, the public’s growing awareness of the importance of nutrition, and America’s disenchantment with allopathic medicine resulted in increasing respect for alternative medicine and the rejuvenation of naturopathy.

In 1978, after twenty years with only one legitimate college graduating naturopathic physicians (National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland, OR), the first new naturopathic medical school, Bastyr University, was opened in Seattle, WA. In 1987, Bastyr University became the first naturopathic college to become accredited by the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education, which is the federally recognized accrediting agency for naturopathic medical colleges. There are four recognized naturopathic medical colleges in the United States (Bastyr in Seattle, WA, NCNM in Portland, OR and SCNM in Tempe, AZ, UBCNM in Connecticut at the University of Bridgeport), and one in Canada (CCNM in Toronto).

Naturopathic medical training begins with a conventional pre-medical education. The student progresses to a four-year, scientifically-based medical school program. The first two years concentrate on standard medical school sciences such as anatomy, physiology, chemistry, etc.

The second two years are oriented toward the clinical sciences, diagnosis and treatment. Standard medical techniques are taught along with mainstay naturopathic medical therapies. The end product of a naturopathic medical school program is a well-rounded family care physician that specializes in such therapies as:

- nutrition
- botanical medicines
- homeopathy
• acupuncture
• natural childbirth
• hydrotherapy
• fasting
• physical therapy
• exercise therapy
• counseling
• and lifestyle modification.

The naturopathic physician can also integrate these therapies with conventional medical therapies when appropriate.

Today, there are approximately a dozen postgraduate naturopathic medical residency positions available to graduates of an accredited naturopathic medical school. A whole food nutritional supplement company located in Palmyra, Wisconsin has been added to this list as the first industry-sponsored naturopathic medical residency. With monitoring by the National College of Naturopathic Medicine to ensure compliance with the certification standards set by the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education and supervision by Dr. Tim Birdsall, N.D., this residency focuses on research and integrative medicine. The residents will rotate through conventional health care clinics, hospitals, and medical centers and develop the corporate wellness program. Evidence-based clinical research will be implemented using nutraceutical products. The goals of the residency program are to integrate herbal and nutritional products into conventional medical practices, evaluate the clinical efficacy of alternative medicine, and train the best naturopathic clinicians and clinical researchers within an integrative model.

Today, naturopathic medicine is experiencing an increased awareness in medicine and within the public realm. It is now common for conventional medical organizations that in the past have spoken out against naturopathic medicine to endorse such naturopathic techniques as lifestyle modification, exercise, and nutritional support.

Consumers are demanding a wider range of health care services and are also recognizing the value of natural healing versus prescription drugs. With the support from all alternative medical practitioners, I foresee the naturopathic physician excelling as the primary care physician of the 20th century.

About The Author
Michele Ferchoff earned her B.S. in biology from the University Wisconsin, La Crosse and then attended the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine and Health Sciences, one of four accredited naturopathic medical schools in the country, where she graduated as a N.M.D. in 2002. Michele has several years of practical and clinical experience. She was selected as one of two residents for the National College of Naturopathic Medicine/Standard Process residency program, the first naturopathic residency in Wisconsin’s history, beginning in September 2002. Michele is one of only five naturopathic physicians in Wisconsin who have graduated from a four-year accredited naturopathic medical school.

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