

HISTORY OF NATUROPATHIC MEDICINE

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The roots of naturopathy can be traced back to the teachings of Hippocrates, Galen and Paracelsus, but many of its healing traditions are derived from religious tradition, folk and Native American medicine. In the early part of the 19th century, medicine in America was as wild and untamed as the frontier which was then being settled. Healing took many forms from the herbal medicine and Shaman rituals of the Native Americans to the mercury purges and blood letting of the allopathic practitioners, each giving rise to systems of medicine which would compete with one another over the next century. To this was added the folk medicine traditions the large European immigration of the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought with it. Because of the nature of the American way of life, movements which begin in the population at large often become inherent in the culture and help to provide a medium for future growth. Such was the setting for Naturopathy when the 20th century arrived.

Naturopathy was brought to the United States in 1896 by Dr. Benedict Lust, who set up the first college and sanitarium in New York City. At the urging of his mentor, Father Sebastian Kneipp of Germany, he began teaching the Kneipp Water Cure which was so popular in Europe. Dr. Lust established the Kneipp Water-Cure Institute in New York City, which later began teaching the use of diet, nutrition, light therapy, spinal manipulation, homeopathy and herbal medicine. This was the first of numerous naturopathic medical schools which were to spring up over the next few decades. From this beginning, the ideas, philosophy and medicine spread until naturopathic medicine was on the leading edge of the nature cure movement of the early and middle 20th century.

In the early 1900's an educator was hired by the Council on Medical Education and the Carnegie Foundation to do an independent report in order to verify the findings of the American Medical Association. The educator was Abraham Flexner who visited each of the existing schools, assigning them an A, B or C rating. In 1910, with the release of the Flexner Report, the emphasis on medical education in America changed significantly. Federal money for medical education went predominantly to schools which emphasized drug therapy and surgery and sources of funding for the eclectic medicine, homeopathic and naturopathic medical schools quickly disappeared. Additionally, intense lobbying by the emerging American Medical Association (AMA) helped to provide a favorable regulatory climate for the "scientifically" based schools and for its own political agenda.

With the reorganization of medical education and the changes in the legislative atmosphere, those schools which found themselves philosophically opposed to the emerging paradigm were under funded and slowly disappeared. The last naturopathic medical school of the late 20th century was closed in 1954. In 1956 the National College of Naturopathic Medicine was founded in Portland, Oregon to serve as the basis for the rebirth of naturopathic medical education.

Following some sparse years, naturopathic medical colleges are presently undergoing a rejuvenation of interest and rising attendance in the modern era. Presently, there are six colleges of naturopathic medicine in North America. Besides National College in Portland, Oregon there is Bastyr University in Seattle, Washington, Southwest College of Natural Health Sciences in Phoenix, Arizona, the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine in Toronto, Canada, The University of Bridgeport College of Naturopathic Medicine in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and The Boucher Institute of Naturopathic Medicine in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Additionally, the naturopathic profession, in the modern era, is also comprised of the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education (CNME) which maintains standards of education and accredits the medical colleges, the Naturopathic Physicians Licensing Examination (NPLEX), which oversees administering a national licensing examination, the North American Board of Naturopathic Examiners (NABNE), as well as the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP), the national voice of the profession.

Because of its folk tradition and eclectic nature, naturopathy has drawn from many traditions to define itself. There has always been an openness to new therapeutic modalities which aid in the healing process, regardless of their source, as long as they conform to the philosophy of the medicine. Therefore, naturopathic physicians will often utilize new therapies long before conventional medicine "discovers" them, as long as they do no harm to the patient and withstand scientific and clinical scrutiny. Conversely, naturopathic medicine has been quick to call attention to those therapies which are harmful to the human organism and counteract the healing power of nature or the vital force. Because of this, naturopathy has more often than not found itself in conflict with other disciplines of medicine who do not share the same philosophy.

As with any dynamic profession, naturopathy is constantly redefining its role in the health care system while continuing to embrace the traditions of the past. The modern definition of naturopathic medicine was recently modified by a committee of the American Association of Naturopathic Physician's House of Delegates and ratified by that body in 1990.

Naturopathic medicine is a distinct method of primary health care - an art, science, philosophy and practice of diagnosis, treatment and prevention of illness. Naturopathic physicians seek to restore and maintain optimum health in their patients by emphasizing nature's inherent self healing process, the vis medicatrix naturae. This is accomplished through education and the rational use of therapeutics. [source: AANP]