

Naturopathy: A Pre-holiday Rant



By *Lila Abassi* — May 27, 2016



Naturopathy via [Shutterstock](#) [1]

I had a tough time coming up with a title for what I wished to write. We, as an organization, stand by debunking junk science and advocating against misinformation and fear mongering. By upholding these virtues our aim is protecting people from harm and when it comes to naturopathy - harm from non-evidence-based magical science.

It seems to me that while thoroughly critical of the medical profession, many alternative medicine practitioners are very quick at calling themselves doctor and falsely promoting the image that they are [professionally equivalent](#) [2]. What I would like to do is set some boundaries and make some distinctions for our public so that they can make informed decisions.

A *physician* is someone who has undergone the rigorous training to become a medical provider which typically includes four years of undergraduate course work, four years of medical school, and on average, four years of residency in various fields of medical practice. This does not include possible fellowships which can be another two to three years of additional training. Now, let's add that up – that's about 15 years of training plus or minus one or two years.

Then there are board exams, which are brutal, with regard to the countless hours spent studying for them and the hours spent sitting through them. I will not discuss the hours spent away from family, missing holidays or any other special event, skipping meals and forgoing sleep to name a few things, that come with training, all while trying to care for the lives of other human beings.

Let's discuss now, the naturopathic 'doctor', who wishes to be [covered by Medicaid](#) [3] and is and has been fervently [lobbying](#) [4] for this privilege. To be allowed into a naturopathic school, you must have a college degree with some science background (although, no calculus those lucky dogs!). Then, for example, according to [Bastyr University website](#) [5], what they consider an equivalent to medical school, each year begins with case studies that build on knowledge from previous years so that their students "think more like doctors and not like scientists." Do they mean skepticism? As a doctor, I hope that I think scientifically about information.

I won't delve to deeply into their [entire curriculum](#) [6], only a few quick observations. As an example, their "physical sciences" are practicing hydrotherapy, electrotherapy and colon

cleansing. I am finding it difficult not to laugh and also wondering why they feel disturbing the natural microbiota of the colon via [dangerous means with no proven health benefits](#) [7] is beneficial. Is it my colon that's blocking my qi?

Moving on, but still picking Bastyr as an example, their course description for counseling patients class states, “multiple specific skills applicable across theoretical orientations, including use of questions, encouraging, paraphrasing, summarizing, confrontation, reflection of feeling, focusing, directives, *and others*.” I am dying to know what the ‘others’ are. But it sounds more like putting words into patients' mouths, formulating patients' responses for them and plain old guessing.

They are also trained in harvesting medicinal plants and compounding their own medicines. If patients seeking alternative medicine are so distrustful to begin with, how can they blindly put their faith in what ‘herbs’ are in the mortar and pestle of the naturopathic doctor? Where are the regulating agencies that oversee their standards of safe practices? We have written about [Theranos](#) [8] labs before and have been deeply critical of their blatant disregard for maintaining patient safety – we are not biased against alternative medicine – we are biased against potentially dangerous practices.

When in 1968, naturopaths asked what is now the Department of Health and Human Services for [medicare reimbursements](#) [4] the response was as follows:

Naturopathic theory and practice are not based on the body of basic knowledge related to health, disease, and health care that has been widely accepted by the scientific community. Moreover, irrespective of its theory, the scope and quality of naturopathic education do not prepare the practitioner to make an adequate diagnosis and provide appropriate treatment.

Well folks, it's sad to say that now, 48 years later, this argument still holds. To quote [Peter Lipson, MD](#) [9], an internist practicing in Michigan who has been critical of the “vitalism” principle that guides these alternative healthcare practices: “If something is immeasurable and un-observable, either directly or indirectly, then it is not medically relevant...if you are claiming that an intervention is helping a patient, then you are claiming that it is measurable and observable. If a measurable, observable phenomenon is better explained by known physical laws than by a vitalistic explanation, then why make up a silly, non-reality-based explanation?”

I do not wish to scorn complementary alternative medicine or the belief in the duality of mind and body - I firmly believe that yoga and tai chi are great, as a hobby. What I do appreciate about Western medicine is that there is no guessing, no anecdotal data, no conforming to someone's principles. It is based on studies that have been done and redone to come up with appropriate guidelines in maintaining the health and well-being of human beings. As [naturopaths themselves have attested](#) [10], if treatments don't align with their principles then they disavow it. Actual science doesn't really care what your principles are – the treatment is what it is. No one likes the idea of taking warfarin for preventing strokes, but there is evidence supporting its use – not tinctures of whatever obscure herb.

This was my rant. I know it will irritate many people and I don't like to irritate people but irrespective of my principles – facts are what they are and to me, science trumps magic and mysticism.

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[2] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-stanclift-nd/naturopathic-doctors_b_1923371.html

[3] <http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2016/05/naturopaths-weaseled-way-health-care-system-want.html>

[4] <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/465994>

[5] <http://www.bastyr.edu/academics/areas-study/study-naturopathic-medicine/naturopathic-doctor-degree-program#Curriculum>

[6] <http://bastyr.smartcatalogiq.com/en/2015-2016/2015-2016-Academic-Catalog/School-of-Naturopathic-Medicine/Doctor-of-Naturopathic-Medicine/Doctor-of-Naturopathic-Medicine-Program>

[7] <http://www.gastroendonews.com/In-the-News/Article/12-11/Dangers-of-Colonic-Hydrotherapy/19875/ses=ogst>

[8] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/03/11/theranos-blatant-disregard-for-patient-safety/>

[9] <https://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/the-death-and-rebirth-of-vitalism/>

[10] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amy-rothenberg-nd/naturopathy_b_1660830.html