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Naturopathic Medicine & Acupuncture

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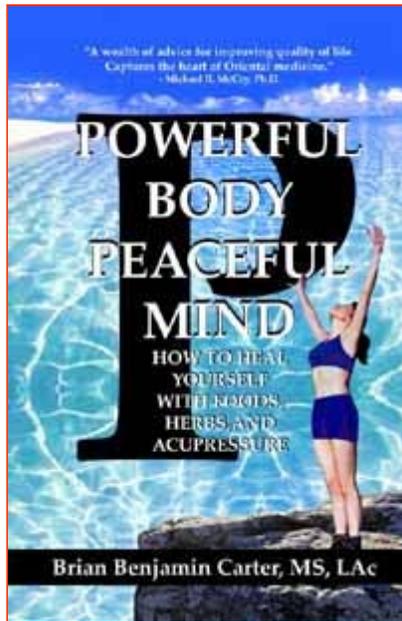
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Naturopathic Medicine & Acupuncture

By [Peter B. Bongiorno ND,
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Dr. Peter Bongiorno graduated from Bastyr University, the leading accredited university for science-based natural medicine, and was graduation class speaker. He completed five years of training in naturopathic medicine and acupuncture. Dr. Bongiorno is currently revising and editing the Textbook of Natural Medicine. He is a member of the American Association for Naturopathic Physicians, New York Association of Naturopathic Physicians, Physicians for Social Responsibility and is a Diplomat in Acupuncture. Prior to medical school he worked as a researcher at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland and Yale University School of Medicine in New



Haven, Connecticut.

The term naturopathy refers to the idea of "nature cure," which uses the healing power of nature in an effort to allow the patient to cure their own illness by stimulating the body's vital force, or qi. The tenets of naturopathy hail from a number of healing traditions, including Ayurveda, European eclectic medicines, the Greeks, and the Chinese Taoist tradition. Although a few naturopathic colleges were functional at the beginning of the 20th century, subsequent monopolization by the conventional medical profession led to legislation that severely restricted use of other health care systems. However, in the last 30 years, public awareness of natural modalities, combined with a genuine discontent for the current healthcare system in the United States has led to a resurgence of naturopathic medicine.

Although its practitioners are quite eclectic in style, the foundation of naturopathy rests in philosophical principles shared by all naturopathic doctors (NDs). These are:

[The healing power of nature (*vis medicatrix naturae*): nature works through innate systems of healing in the body, and it is the ND's job to access this vital healing energy using the safest methods possible. These methods often use nature themselves, in the forms of water therapies, botanicals, diet, exercise, etc...



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- **First Do No Harm (Primum Non Nocere):** naturopathic physicians explore the least harmful methods possible, and will resort to drugs and surgical means and/or refer to doctors who use these only when necessary
- **Find the Cause (Tolle Causam):** the naturopathic doctor is trained not just to look at symptoms, but to unearth the underlying factors and mechanisms of the patient's condition
- **Doctor as Teacher (Docere):** inherent in the word "doctor" derives the meaning "teacher". All doctors are obligated to teach their patients about their health, in order to affect the best healing possible.
- **Treat the Whole Person:** since health and disease is subject to

multiple factors, including physiologic, psychological, spiritual, genetic, dietary, lifestyle and other factors, naturopathic doctors are trained to spend time with each patient and ferret out these factors.

- **Preventive medicine:** although naturopathic physicians are successful at treating disease conditions, it is recognized that the best medicine is to prevent illness by studying a patient's life, history, family, history, and lab tests in order assess which diseases they may be most susceptible to. In this way, healthy changes can take place years before disease can take hold.

Education & Licensure

Today, there are four accredited schools of naturopathic medicine in the United States: Bastyr University (Washington State), the National College of Naturopathic Medicine (Oregon), Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine (Arizona) and the University of Bridgeport (Connecticut). There is also the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine in Ontario.

The education of a naturopathic physician is equivalent to that of a medical doctor. Rigorous coursework and includes basic and clinical sciences as well as physical and laboratory diagnosis, are at the same level as their allopathic medical doctor (MD) counterparts. One addition to the curriculum is a pervasive philosophy of holism, which is a motif present throughout most classes and clinical supervision. Although a naturopathic medical student has less access to hospital work than a standard allopathic doctor, they do log many more hours in a supervised primary care setting. A naturopathic doctor's education focuses less on pharmacologic treatments, and instead focuses on holistic philosophy, western botanical medicines, nutritional therapies, homeopathy, spinal manipulation, counseling and stress reduction and hydrotherapy techniques. Naturopathic doctors sit for both basic science and clinical board examines which they must pass in order to be licensed as a primary care provider.

Currently, fourteen U.S. states and most Canadian provinces license

naturopathic doctors as primary care physicians. The two most recent additions to U.S. state licensure are California and the District of Columbia. Legislative proceedings are also actively moving forward in many states, including Florida and New York. Scope of practice in licensed states generally includes all naturopathic modalities, diagnostic testing and imaging rights, prescription of some antibiotics and steroidal drugs, injections, minor surgery, and naturopathic manipulation of the spine. An ND's scope of practice does vary from state to state. Although not comprehensively covered like their allopathic counterparts, insurance companies are covering more and more naturopathic physicians.

As part of a standard curriculum, naturopathic doctors are generally taught at least one class of Chinese Medicine fundamentals. For this author, it was this first-year class that piqued my enthusiasm for Chinese Medicine, and eventually led me to pursue a separate master's degree in acupuncture. The naturopathic schools in Arizona and Connecticut also broadly teach acupuncture theory and technique basics, for in those states it is within a naturopath's scope of practice to perform acupuncture. The acupuncture education in these schools is adequate to competently practice, but is not nearly as comprehensive as a standard Masters of Science program, and does not confer a separate master's degree.

Similarities of Naturopathic Medicine and Acupuncture

Naturopathic physicians look at the body as a whole, similar to Chinese medicine practitioners. Like a TCM practitioner, an ND tends to have a broadly inclusive medical view, using standard diagnostic lab tests and imaging, lifestyle and diet therapies, and careful assessments of environment and psychological makeup of the patient in order to create a comprehensive treatment plan. As each patient's case is individual, naturopathic therapies tend to work slowly by building and nourishing the body, and improving the patient's vital force. Often, the ND will focus on digestive function and liver health in order to achieve nutrient assimilation. Although naturopathic doctors do use botanical medicines including some Chinese herbs, the Western botanical formulary is generally different from those utilized in Chinese medicine. Some naturopathic doctors with a special interest in Chinese patent medicines

may use these instead of Western herbal preparations.

Differences from Chinese Medicine

In general, NDs do not take "qi" balance per se into account when considering a diagnosis or treatment plan. A naturopathic doctor's training does not encourage the acumen necessary for pulse and meridian palpation as well as tongue diagnosis. Therefore, he or she tends to rely on patient history, laboratory tests, and previous diagnoses as a starting point to understand disharmonies. Naturopathic doctors do not tend to assess pathogenic contributors to illness such as heat, cold, dampness, and dryness and often does not associate organ dysfunction with typical emotional disturbances (for example, grief and the lung). Nevertheless, my personal experience has found repeatedly that both naturopathic and Chinese medicine thinking are generally very supportive of the vital qi energy and are quite complementary to each other.

Benefits of Combination Therapies

In a time of an emerging nationwide integrative medicine model, both naturopathy and Chinese medicine can learn from and substantially support each other. Oftentimes, Chinese medicine can add a sense of balance to a routine naturopathic program. For instance, naturopathic doctors often offer patients nutritive and health protein shakes, which are good idea in order for the patient to gain nourishment and build their qi. Unfortunately if a patient has a lot of damp cold, and low spleen function from a Chinese perspective, these shakes can tend to "muck up" the system, and cause more dampness, which can exacerbate the condition - especially in the wintertime. Being able to assess this low spleen function and drain damp first, from a Chinese perspective, can often help the patient feel better, and increase their ability to absorb nutrients. Later on, possibly in the summertime, a small shake with warming herbs may prove more useful to support the body and reduce the cold and dampness.

Similarly, when a Chinese practitioner treats a diabetic's yin deficiency with excess heat, it would be wise to consider specific naturopathic dietary and nutrient therapeutic protocols well known to balance blood

sugar and inhibit dysglycemia. My experience with diabetic neuropathy patients have demonstrated the clear advantage of combining both medicines to reduce hand and foot pains, as well as to regulate blood sugar more effectively. Often, naturopathic treatments can be used concomitantly with Chinese loose herb formulas too, although the health care practitioners involved should communicate to avoid any possible untoward treatment interactions.

Conclusion

Naturopathic medicine has a long rich history of practical, safe, and effective medicine. As a practitioner who actively employs both Chinese and naturopathic medicine synergistically, I find the potency of using them in combination far exceeds the capacity of either medicine alone. To conclude, I strongly suggest that it would be in the best interest of both acupuncturists/ Chinese medicine practitioners and naturopathic physicians to be aware of each other's therapeutic abilities, and possibly cross-refer patients, as well as communicate with regards to common patients so that the best of both philosophies can be employed for the patient's optimal care. More information regarding naturopathic medicine can be found in the links section of www.innersourcehealth.com.

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