



Treating the Whole Person Then and Now - A philosophical paper

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In this article, I'll attempt to identify how to *treat the whole person* (one of the core principles of Naturopathic Medicine), and how that has changed over the 30- plus years that I've been in practice. The observation that stands out to me is that the rate of change in the practice of naturopathic medicine has accelerated dramatically and shows no signs of slowing down.

When I started naturopathic college in 1975 at NCM in Portland Oregon, it was the only naturopathic school in North America. There were approximately 50 registrants in Ontario and no schools in Canada. Now in 2019 we have grown to over 1000 registrants in Ontario, with two schools in Canada, five in the U.S., and a candidate school in Puerto Rico. Furthermore, in my experience, when I started my practice, no one knew what a naturopathic doctor was or did. Today, many people either know or know of someone who does. This is remarkable progress in a mere 30 years.

Naturopathic doctors have always purported to treat the whole person. However, from my perspective, I have observed in our profession what I call band-wagon trends.

Initially, there were the naturopathic "raw food enthusiasts." They believed that all our ills could be traced back to eating improperly. The solution was to eat only raw foods. This "shoots and sprouts, beads and seeds" philosophy was quite popular at the beginning of the resurgence of naturopathic medicine in the early '70s. After a while, its limitations became obvious. Then, in the middle '70s, it was thought that many of our patients had hypoglycemia and that correcting that condition would lead to perfect health. Still later on, many patients were believed to have singular conditions, such as a candida dysbiosis. Then there was a focus on conditions such as chronic fatigue, multiple food sensitivities, Epstein Barr virus, hypothyroidism and Lyme disease. Virtually, everyone that walked in the door had one or more of these problems and practitioners became "experts" in treating these particular ills.

Currently, there is a band-wagon trend toward embracing IV therapies for chelation or nutrition and that every illness can be solved with that therapy. There also seems to be a clamour for the latest protocols to practice what I refer to as "cookbook" medicine which is where a patient fits neatly into a "disease entity" and can be treated according to a particular formula gleaned from the latest seminar. There is a move to seek legislation to extend our prescribing capabilities in order to prescribe pharmaceuticals. This has happened in British Columbia and Ontario (and it is possible that other

provinces might also seek prescribing authority). Consequently, naturopathic doctors are becoming increasingly reliant on blood tests and lab work, which is not a bad thing but it may mean that we lose sight of wholism or the "whole person." Thus, we may view our patient as, for example, a chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) case rather than a person who happens to be diagnosed with CLL.

There have also been band wagon trends in therapeutics, particularly in Homeopathy. The Kentian approach was considered the best way to treat. Then came Vitoulkis' methods: the only Classical "Truth." Following this, Eisayaga from Argentina had the most practical method. Soon other practitioners from overseas such as Jeremy Sherr, Schroyens, and other European masters became prominent. More recently the methods of Indian masters led by Sankaran are considered the only good way to practice. Always the controversy of the use of complex versus classical homeopathy has existed. We hope that a more unified stance on using Homeopathy will eventually prevail.

Another issue is that naturopaths are gravitating toward specialization. They seem to be reluctant to treat certain conditions and instead refer to ND experts in a given field (for example: oncology). While that can be relevant and beneficial for the patient, we should not be fearful of treating anyone with basic naturopathic principles.

At any rate, these band wagon trends had their usefulness and they weren't necessarily wrong or negative in and of themselves, but they can, I believe, detract from the philosophy of treating the whole person.

Core and accepted Naturopathic principles such as "treating the whole person" are congruent with the basic tenets of naturopathic medicine. *Primum Non Nocere*, *Vis Medicatrix Naturae*, *Tolle Causam*, and "Doctor as Teacher" are all solid principles on which to build a practice. We must be ever vigilant and not lose sight of these foundational ideas.

Primum Non Nocere or "Above all, do no harm"

This must remain as one of our most important goals. After all, we want to alleviate suffering, but while attempting to do that, NDs

should make sure they do not make things worse. The recent changes in overall naturopathic practice such as embracing IVs and pharmaceutical prescribing, definitely increases the risk of harming patients.

Vis Medicatrix Naturae or “the healing power of nature”

Sometimes we think we know better than nature and are in too much of a hurry to let nature take its course. This is counter-productive because nature has a habit of getting her own way whether we try to hurry her or not. Obeying nature’s rhythms always pays great dividends to both patient and practitioner. For example, wanting to go back to work immediately instead of allowing time for the body to heal after an acute illness often leads to unwanted complications.

Tolle Causum or “Treat the cause”

Again, do we have or do we take the time needed to get right down to the cause of disease? Is the patient depressed because of some cause you may have missed? Have their parents died, for example? If we don’t get to know our patients well, engage in some small talk or do a thorough history, we may miss some important information.

Docere or “Doctor as Teacher”

This is where we can have our most profound influence and impact on people’s lives. For example, recently, there has been good solid “scientific” evidence showing the importance of diet and lifestyle. In his book, *Overdosed America*, John Abramson discusses an article which claims that the drug Pravachol reduces the risk of stroke by 19%. That sounds impressive until you realize that there are other well documented pharmaceutical free ways to reduce the risk of stroke. For example, eating fish once a week reduces the risk by 22%! Controlling high blood pressure reduces stroke risk by 35-45%. Moderate exercise for less than two hours each week reduces the risk by about 60% in an elderly population! These lifestyle modifications are extremely powerful natural therapies, often more powerful and a great deal safer than drug therapy, and **naturopathic doctors are or should be the experts.**

We need to position ourselves as the experts in natural medicine. We need to be able to recommend credible websites and be familiar with studies that support *natural* treatments, diet and lifestyle. In this information age, the internet has made an incredible amount of information available, so most patients have already read about their condition online and often think they know more about it than their doctors do, and sometimes they’re right! However, the information they get in their searches is often misleading or wrong and we need to be able to point them in the right direction. As a result, we need to be our patients’ trusted source of information as they seek to enhance and achieve optimal health.

Treating the Whole Person also means treating people on a physical, mental/emotional and spiritual level. Evidence shows that belonging to a religious/spiritual organization and/or a supportive group and having a belief system in a higher power are all part of achieving optimal health. Practitioners should be encouraging patients to participate in a spiritual organization and/or spiritual journey.

Another aspect of our role as teachers is to encourage our patients to do volunteer work, look beyond themselves and to make a positive contribution to their community. How often have we heard of retired people determined to enjoy their retirement by not moving or doing anything meaningful, and consequently dying shortly afterwards? We all need meaning and movement in our lives, particularly after retiring. Therefore, counselling our patients or referring them to a competent life coach/counsellor upon their retirement might be the most important thing you can do for them.

Often overlooked is the importance of routine. There is increasing evidence showing that routine contributes a great deal to our well-being. Going to bed at the same time, getting up at the same time, eating meals at the same time, establishing healthy patterns are all important to our overall health. We all know about circadian rhythms, and recent evidence that each organ has its own rhythm reinforces this concept. Further, the lowest cortisol/stress levels are found in people that strictly adhere to routine, such as certain religious groups.

Culturally-speaking, our world has changed considerably in the past 30 years. In our multicultural society, our patients should be encouraged to get to know and interact with other cultural and religious groups rather than staying isolated. A monumental change took place in 2001 when the World Trade Center was destroyed. Since then there have been many economic and political shocks that harm our sense of safety and predictability. For example, the long-term impact of climate change. These events and their impacts on us and our patients, must be considered when ‘treating the whole person’.

Other events that impact our health have to do with unbelievably rapid advances in technology. Virtually everyone has a smart device. This is demonstrated when I go for a walk in the morning and try to greet other pedestrians. Often they do not notice the people around them because they are engrossed in the information on their device: *They are not in touch with their environment, with how the earth feels, the birds singing, the wind, the sun and their fellow travelers!* Although the technological advances in personal mobile devices may be wonderful, the result is our preoccupation with a device. This means anyone can get interrupted anytime, making it difficult to experience “down” or meditative time. This was not the case a mere 30 years ago! When “treating the whole person,” this too needs to be addressed. We need to be more in touch with ourselves, our lives and our surroundings.

Many other professions are beginning to do what we do. TCM and homeopathy, for example, are regulated separately under the Ontario Ministry of Health. We are seen as competing with what MDs do. We must be very careful that we don’t lose sight of our basic principles because if we do, we’ll rightfully lose our unique position in the health care field.

Naturopathic doctors need to be trend setters, and leaders. We are all blessed to be part of this profession through which we can

make lasting, useful, and meaningful changes in people's lives. We are also incredibly fortunate that our profession is so vibrant and diverse. This is both a strength and a weakness; a strength in that here are many roads to healing, and in diversity there is strength; a weakness in that we can become scattered and not effective in any one treatment. Overall NDs play a different role than MDs in our health care system, which can be best fulfilled by sticking to our core principles.

Naturopathic doctors can help our society rediscover its innate healing capabilities. Now is our time – *Carpe Diem!* 🍂

About the author

Dr. John Bender, ND believes that optimal health is essential for a good life. He is passionate about helping others achieve optimal health using complex homeopathy, botanicals, vitamins, minerals, and other nutritional means. A balanced lifestyle and lifestyle habits are also essential to the whole program.

He believes that in our present daily toxic environment, it is important to assist the body in eliminating toxins and to prevent or limit further exposures.

Dr. Bender received the Naturopath of the Year Award in 2003 from the Ontario Association of Naturopathic Doctors. In 2007, John was one of 50 Faculty of Science graduates of the University of Waterloo to receive the Alumni of Honour Award. He recently received the Award for Excellence in Holistic Medicine from the Holistic Doctors Recognition Board.

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