

Naturopathic Medicine on the Frontline of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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As a Naturopathic Doctor (ND), I was fortunate to spend the summer of 2021 providing naturopathic care on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic. I had the opportunity to work for a regional health authority in British Columbia, as part of British Columbia's COVID-19 immunization campaign. When the community immunization campaign accelerated, in March 2021, the Provincial Health Officer called on all qualified health professionals to contribute their skills to protect their communities and help end the COVID-19 pandemic by working as immunizers at mass immunization sites around the province. In BC, NDs, who hold Prescriptive Authority and are Immunization Certified through the BC Centre for Disease Control, are qualified to administer vaccines. Along with physicians, nurses (RN, LPN, RPN), and pharmacists, NDs are part of a core group of health professionals who can administer vaccines within their scope of practice.¹ Due to the scale and urgency of the COVID-19 immunization campaign, additional professions were “deputized” to assist in the campaign by Special Order.² This all-hands-on-deck approach had the goal of immunizing our population as quickly, safely, and effectively as possible. At the time of this writing, 3,837,848 people in BC have been fully immunized.³ I am proud to be one of the many health-care providers in BC who contributed to this achievement, particularly because working on the immunization campaign followed the principles of naturopathic medicine.

Even before I was asked to join the COVID-19 immunization campaign, support for vaccines within the naturopathic community had been growing steadily. Currently, at least 156 NDs in BC have immunization certification, allowing them to provide vaccines to clients 12 years of age and older.⁴ Perhaps this is due to the increased acceptance that immunization should be considered naturopathic care, since it adheres to both the Naturopathic Therapeutic Order⁵ and the six principles of Naturopathic Medicine.⁶ The safety and efficacy profiles⁷⁻¹² of the COVID-19 vaccines, while not perfect, are impressive and follow the principle of *do no harm*. As the COVID-19 pandemic becomes a “pandemic of the unvaccinated,” unvaccinated individuals are more likely to be harmed through contracting the virus or being admitted to the hospital and/or ICU¹³ than by receiving a vaccine. Both the viral vector and mRNA vaccines capitalize on the *healing power*

of nature to stimulate our self-healing mechanisms by generating an immune response to COVID-19 without community exposure. Once immunized, our own immune systems are able to identify and fight off the COVID-19 virus, *preventing* infections from occurring. As health-care providers, NDs play an important role in educating the public about the COVID-19 vaccines. The College of Naturopathic Doctors of British Columbia has recently reminded BC NDs of the important role of *doctor as teacher* and warned against participating in the spread of misinformation.¹⁴

A typical day at a COVID-19 immunization site would begin with a daily briefing for all the staff present. The briefing included identifying which vaccines and lot numbers were available that day, the number of appointments that had been scheduled, client eligibility for drop-in appointments, any update on the information, safety, efficacy, or adverse events of the COVID-19 vaccines, and of any special security considerations. Clients would be greeted by community volunteers, and office staff would ensure that each person was registered with the provincial immunization tracking system. While waiting for an immunizer, each client had access to take-home information¹⁵ about the risks of contracting COVID-19, and details about the protection offered by and possible adverse reactions to the COVID-19 vaccines. Finally, when a client met with an immunizer, they went through an initial assessment process to determine their suitability to receive a vaccine. Each client was provided accurate information about the possible risks associated with contracting COVID-19 and how the vaccines work to protect them. This was all part of the informed consent process and was presented in clear and plain language. Only after all questions were answered and consent was obtained was a vaccine administered. Afterwards, clients were monitored for 15 minutes to ensure no immediate allergic reactions occurred. By and large, this process was a simple and easy process for a client.

Although immunization is part of the scope of practice for NDs in BC, it is rare for NDs to provide regular immunization services. This is because immunization is typically performed through the publicly funded health-care system and Canadian NDs practice as private health-care providers who work separate from the public system. The COVID-19 immunization campaign provided NDs with a rare opportunity to work within the public system. This

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is of importance to the profession for a number of reasons. The first, and most important reason is that NDs helped to protect our communities from COVID-19, one shot at a time. Second, it improved public awareness of NDs and elevated the profession's profile as one that recognizes the scientific evidence supporting the safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines.^{16,17} Support for COVID-19 immunization is widespread throughout the medical community and it is formally recommended by the National Advisory Committee on Immunization,^{18,19} the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Canadian Medical Association, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada,²⁰ the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada,²¹ and the Canadian Paediatric Society.²² Third, participation in the campaign builds bridges between the public system and the naturopathic profession. There is no better way to demonstrate the competency and proficiency of NDs to our medical colleagues than to work beside them as reliable partners. Fourth, it served a political purpose, as NDs showed that we can be called upon and work reliably when Canada's public health-care system needs assistance. Lastly, the COVID-19 immunization campaign is historic in scope. This was not just a Canadian effort but a global one to end the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of September 2021, 6,136,962,861 COVID-19 vaccine doses had been administered globally.²³ The development and deployment of safe and effective vaccines to protect such a large proportion of the global population is truly a remarkable achievement in medicine, one to which NDs can proudly say that they have helped contribute.

As Canada progresses through the fourth wave of COVID-19 infections, and severe complications from the infection primarily affect the unvaccinated and under-vaccinated, NDs who participated in the COVID-19 immunization campaign should be aware of how working in the campaign has had immeasurably greater impact on our communities than not participating. We helped protect individuals and our communities. We helped our clients make informed choices on their health and we did it in a way that respects our naturopathic principles. Finally, we provided much-needed relief to our colleagues in the public health system and demonstrated that we support evidence-based preventative health measures.

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