

Project Title: Naturopathic Medicine in Vermont's Healthcare System: A Thematic Analysis

Community Agency: Office of Primary Care and Area Health Education Centers (AHEC program)

Abstract

Background: Naturopathy is a practice of medicine that emphasizes natural therapies. In Vermont, Naturopathic doctors (NDs) are eligible for full prescriptive authority and may be designated as primary care providers, however their specific role within the healthcare system is not well understood. The objective of this project was to explore the role of NDs in Vermont's healthcare system.

Methods: Three NDs were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews focused on naturopathic training, attraction to VT, scope of practice, collaboration and communication with other healthcare providers, and health policy. Four team members performed a thematic analysis, which was revised through consensus with the entire research team.

Results: Four themes were identified: 1) naturopathic scope of practice is viewed as similar to that of osteopathic and allopathic physicians; 2) NDs frequently interact and consult with, and may be fully integrated into allopathic practice; 3) naturopathic clinical training takes place mostly in outpatient practice and residency training programs are unfunded; 4) while Vermont insurers (including Medicaid) provide coverage, naturopathy is not covered by Medicare, which limits access to those 65 and older. Our small sample limits generalizability. Lack of an ND on the research team may introduce bias.

Conclusion: NDs in VT practice in various roles from primary care to specialty care. NDs have access to the same prescribing formulary as allopathic/osteopathic physicians. NDs face policy issues that interrupt care continuity. Future research directions include a systemwide survey of NDs, estimation of ND practice volume through claims analysis, and collection of patient perspectives.