

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

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BACKGROUND

What is Naturopathic Medicine?

A system of health care that utilizes **education, natural medicines, and natural therapies** to support and stimulate a patient's intrinsic self-healing processes and **prevents, diagnoses, and treats** human health conditions, injuries, and pain.

How are Naturopathic Physicians (NDs) Licensed in Vermont?

- There are 5 accredited schools of naturopathic medicine in the US and 2 in Canada.
- Naturopathic physicians were recognized as primary care providers (PCP) in 2009. (18 V.S.A. § 704)
- There are 355 NDs licensed in VT, and **88 NDs with a VT address**. (VT licensing data, 2020)
- **81% participate in Medicaid**. (2016 Medicaid data)
- 25 states currently offer licensure or registration to naturopathic physicians. (Fig. 1)
- Vermont, Arizona and Washington permit **full prescriptive authority for licensed NDs**.

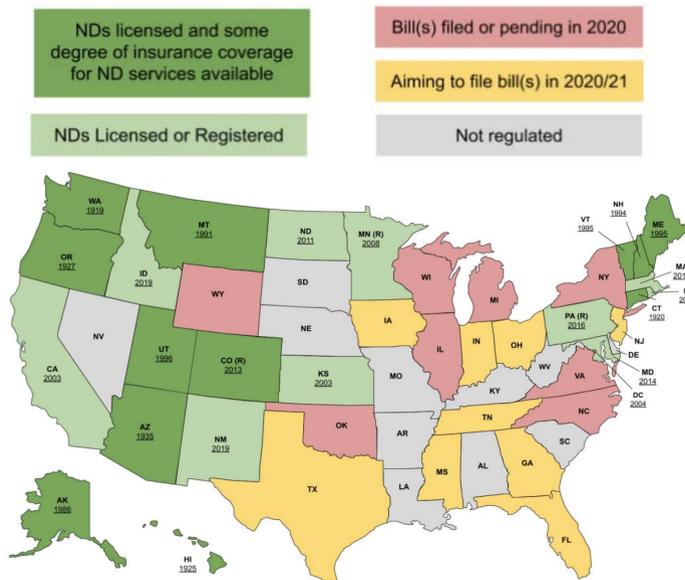


Figure 1: Map of ND Regulation in the United States (The American Association of Naturopathic Physicians, February 2020)

OBJECTIVE:

To explore the role of naturopathic physicians in Vermont's healthcare system

RESULTS

QUALITATIVE THEMES & QUOTES FROM VT NDs

Scope of Practice



- ND's treat many of the same conditions as **allopathic (MD) and osteopathic (DO) physicians**, (e.g. hypertension, diabetes, anxiety and depression, musculoskeletal disorders, and irritable bowel syndrome). They may have **specific areas of focus or expertise**.
- ND's perform **procedures** such as suturing, skin biopsies, joint and trigger point injection, and therapeutic ultrasound.

"I have a foot in the worlds of both alternative and conventional medicine."

"I see all the normal primary care conditions."

"Vermont allows me to be a PCP, bill insurance, and practice as I'm trained."

Collaboration & Consultation



- NDs **collaborate with MDs/DOs** and may be fully integrated as a member of the care team in allopathic primary care practice.
- NDs may provide **primary care or specialty/consultative services**.

"I co-manage patients with both allopathic and osteopathic physicians, which includes sending and receiving referrals, exchanging notes, and calling with questions. I interact with virtually every single specialty."

"About 75% of my patients have a conventional PCP [of record], but they see me exclusively; the other is more of a formality."

Education & Training

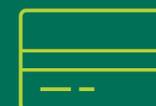


- ND clinical training takes place primarily in **outpatient primary care** practices. Residency programs are available, but they are **underdeveloped and unfunded**.
- ND degree programs are **four years** in duration; residencies consist of a **one-year apprenticeship** with a licensed naturopathic doctor.

"I believe that every graduate should complete a residency program, but there isn't enough funding."

"Specialty societies are beginning to develop for NDs, which will present opportunities to receive extra training in specialized care."

Insurance



- Currently, naturopathic medicine is **NOT covered by Medicare**, which is a significant obstacle for the continuity of care of ND patients.
- In Vermont, naturopathic medicine **IS covered by Medicaid** and many private insurance companies.

"[Lack of Medicare coverage] essentially means that patients lose their doctors at age 65."

"About 95% of my practice is insurance based and the rest pay out of pocket."

METHODS

Interview Process

- Three NDs from practices in Chittenden County, (two independent practices, one community health center).
- Interview guide developed by the research team.
- Inquiry focused on education and training, and the practicalities of naturopathic practice in Vermont.

ANALYSIS:

Thematic analysis by four reviewers to reach consensus; subsequent discussion with the entire research team.

DISCUSSION

1. To what extent are NDs practicing as **PCPs vs. specialists**?
2. Would a **residency program** influence patients' and healthcare providers' views of NPs?
3. If we expand the scope of this study to include other regions in the US, how might the role of NPs as PCPs change, if at all?
4. Given the widespread physician shortage, should naturopaths have a larger role in **primary care delivery and increasing access to care**?
5. Should Naturopaths be included in **Medicare**? How would this affect the healthcare landscape in terms of access to care?

Limitations

- Small sample size may not be representative of ND practice across VT.
- Lack of ND on the research team may bias thematic analysis.

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

- NDs in VT practice within different models of care from primary care to specialty care, and some are fully integrated into allopathic practice.
 - NDs are afforded access to the same prescribing formulary as allopathic/osteopathic physicians
 - NDs face healthcare policy issues that interrupt continuity of care
- ### Future Directions
- Systematic survey of all NDs in VT
 - Claims analysis: Summarize clinical activity based on billing/utilization data in the VT all-payer claims dataset
 - Patient perspective regarding naturopathic medicine