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)
• 88 NDs with a Vermont license as of 2020.
• There are 355 NDs licensed in VT, and 88 NDs with a VT address.

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.
| "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."
| "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."
| "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."
| "[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."

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

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? Should Naturopaths be included in Medicare? How would this affect the healthcare landscape in terms of access to care?
5. What is the role of NDs in Vermont’s healthcare system?

DISCUSSION

• 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.

METHODS

• Interview Process
• 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

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

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

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