

Ecological Perspectives on Allopathic and Naturopathic Medicine

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"To be in a state of positive health is to be on good terms with the cosmos."

-Skolimowski

Introduction

Human control over nature is characteristic of all Western Thought, including allopathic medicine. Since Descartes, matter has been considered separate from the spirit and the physical body, as part of matter, must be controlled for its own good. A physician is taught a "stewardship" view of the body that parallels society's "stewardship" view of nature. It is well-intentioned, yet based on an attitude of control and domination. This is not to say that Biomedicine¹ does not have its place. Rather, as we re-evaluate our relationship to the environment, we must necessarily re-evaluate our health care. "The ancient formula of one ill, one pill, one bill, which seems to have been the credo of physicians for many generations should be abandoned...Disease cannot be understood without an ecological study in depth [that includes] the environment, the host, and the culture"¹. Naturopathic medicine provides an alternative philosophy to Biomedicine that embodies environmental principles. These ecological tenets include finding deeper solutions than a technological fix, valuing diversity, accepting human limitations, trusting the Healing Power of Nature, and considering the ecosystem as a whole.

Technological Fixes

Biomedical thinking assumes that technology can save us from disease, the way it will save us from environmental pollution. This can create a vicious cycle where we add technological fix to technological fix in order to address side effects from the previous intervention. We give antifungals for a yeast infection subsequent to antibiotic use, the way we develop high tech dump sites for radioactive material generated by nuclear power plants. "We have done to our bodies what we have done to the soil - used heroic measures to conquer organisms while destroying the natural ecology that has existed in equilibrium for generations"². We jump from symptom management to symptom management, failing to address the root causes of ill health in humans and the environment.

Naturopathic medicine, by adhering to the principle "*Tolle Causam*"/ "Treat the Cause", seeks to avoid these technological fixes. Its goal is to identify and treat the root cause,

¹Biomedicine is a synonym for Western Allopathic Medicine, which assumes that all diseases are materially generated by specific agents (eg.bacteria, parasites) or an internal biochemical imbalance.

whether it be a toxic lifestyle, toxic psychological environment or toxic physical environment. Its aim is prevention, a well-known theme in the environmental movement. While technological fixes may sometimes be necessary, both Naturopathy and environmentalism ask questions such as, "How did we get here?" and "How may we live in order to be healthy for seven generations?". In practice, however, it is common for Naturopathic doctors to identify root causes but feel unable to take action to remedy them. For example, we suggest a Reverse Osmosis System to purify our patient's water without pressing for stricter pollution and purification laws. It is taking this next step that makes us truly effective in prevention.

A recent example of a Naturopathic doctor who truly "Treats the Cause" is Sat Dharam Kaur. She has developed a program and workbook on Naturopathic approaches to breast cancer prevention and treatment that includes a large section on the environmental links to breast cancer. She also spearheaded a "Rachel Carson Day" where the public meets annually to protest hormone disrupting chemicals and petition for a safer environment. This combination of individual Naturopathic treatment and community activism to prevent cancer-causing chemicals is a wonderful example of Treating the Root Cause.

Diverse Ways of Knowing

When Descartes separated matter from spirit, the body became a machine rather than something sacred. The body as a machine is a powerful metaphor - one whereby the body can be "objectively" known through science and technically fixed by a doctor. Out of this came the monoculture of Biomedicine where "signs" (apparently objective indications) are more valid than "symptoms" (the patients' experiences). Taken a step further, signs from a machine are considered even more valid than physical signs that a doctor observes. As a result, Biomedical doctors will often insist that nothing is wrong with a patient if lab results are normal. Biomedicine defers to technical reports rather than trust the physician's ability to hear the patient. We learn to fear all of the invisible and unknown things that lurk inside us the way we fear creatures in the woods.

In contrast, Naturopathic physicians believe that there are numerous epistemologies (ways of knowing) that bring us closer to the truth. Naturopaths will rely on diverse signs and symptoms in making a diagnosis. For example, a patient with a normal serum TSH may have very real symptoms of hypothyroidism, a low basal body temperature, a thin, weak pulse and pale tongue. They can then be treated according to the diagnosis of subclinical hypothyroidism or, from a Traditional Chinese Medicine perspective, the diagnosis of a Blood Deficiency. Naturopathic medicine, with its broad scope of practice, demands that we as physicians stretch our thinking to include a Chinese, homeopathic, nutritional, botanical and psychological perspective. We are forced to unlearn the principle of a single diagnosis and a single treatment protocol. This creates opportunity in our thinking for many ways of knowing and finding meaning.

Accepting Limitations

Biomedicine tends to view natural processes as negative things that must be controlled at all costs. Childbirth, pain and disease must be contained and managed while death becomes the enemy. By fighting to control nature and prevent death, Biomedicine tries to protect people from their own vulnerability and mortality. However, it is precisely this weakness that inspires personal transformation and helps to create ecological consciousness. Facing one's frailty and powerlessness can foster a healthy respect for ecological limitations. At the same time, an awareness of one's power when acting in accordance with nature fosters a sense of belonging here on earth. Part of accepting the healing power of nature means trusting natural processes such as birth and death. According to environmental philosophy, death is a natural occurrence, as well as an opportunity to be "compost for future life".

In defining disease, Biomedicine (and at times Naturopathic medicine) creates an expectation of "perfect health" where wellness means the complete absence of disease. From an ecological perspective though, working within the cycles of Nature includes times of ill health. Forest fires are needed for nutrients to return to the soil, as the common cold in children is necessary to educate and activate their immune system. "Dis-ease has always been a signal for change, the voice of the living Earth telling an organism to seek alternatives to its present way of life"³. Thus, there is a healthy way to live disease.

Limitations - environmental, personal, and professional - are hard lessons. We learn in our first months of practice that as Naturopathic Physicians we can only do so much to help our patients. And we learn through our environment that technology as well, can only go so far in fixing the imbalances we create. Unlimited growth, the credo of industrial society, is not sustainable. Unlimited growth in our bodies, cancer, is also not sustainable. Both can eventually kill us.

The idea of limitless progress and "the mechanistic paradigm has wreaked havoc on world ecology, on Third world nations, and on particular individuals who attempted to make their lives in the image of the machine"⁴. Instead of adhering to this idea of limitless progress, Naturopathic Physicians can embrace limitations and promote sustainable lifestyles. This includes living wisely to prevent disease and working to create healthy contexts. This philosophy of health and disease also mandates us to work towards social justice and ecological sanity.

The Healing Power of Nature

In Western philosophy, the body, like the earth, lacks its own wisdom. In contrast, Environmentalists and Naturopaths believe that an inherent wisdom does exist, and in fact, it is our duty to abide by it. The principle that binds every therapy in Naturopathic Medicine is "*Vis Medicatrix Naturae*/ The Healing Power of Nature". The Gaia Hypothesis, which is central to environmental thought, proposes that the Earth acts as a single living organism moving towards homeostasis. Samuel Hahnemann, the founder

of homeopathic medicine, maintains that "the vital force strives instinctively and automatically to free itself from disease by revolutionary processes"⁵. Both Naturopathic Physicians and Environmentalists maintain that there is an inherent balance that guides life and death, ecosystems and our bodies.

According to John Lust, a founder of Naturopathy, "we still clearly observe in sick animals the curative instinct that drives them to hunt out and eat a specific plant as a remedy. This same instinct in man [sic] is numbed by a hypnotising barrage of advertising for chemical-drug medicines. Even so, in all of us there still survives an intuitive preference for the healing powers of Nature's life line, the great continuum of life that both contains us and sustains us. By co-operating with the inherent restorative power of the living organism, we attune ourselves once again to the rhythm of Nature. We grasp the living spirit!"⁶.

Naturopathy relies on the healing power of nature with all of its therapeutic modalities, from counselling to acupuncture, homeopathy to hydrotherapy. It is only on a rare occasion that a Naturopath will depart from acting in accordance with *Vis Medicatrix Naturae* in order to preserve life. For example, when someone goes into shock, it is our duty to compensate for the body's reaction. For the most part though, *vis mediatrix naturae* enables the body and spirit to overcome enormous trauma.

Vis Medicatrix Naturae also helps to prevent the "Doctor as God" complex by reminding Naturopaths who really enacts healing. "The gardener does not make the garden grow. Nature does. The gardener is an ally who prepares the soil, sows the seeds, waters, and removes the weeds, placing plants in the proper relation to each other and the sun"⁷. As gardeners of healthy humans, Naturopaths work with the miracle of Nature.

Treating the Whole Person - An Ecosystem Approach

Biomedicine is based on a reductionist model that emphasizes individual parts rather than the connection between the parts. A disease is identified as a biochemical or organ dysfunction rather than an imbalance in the whole body. Taken further, "silicosis and asbestosis are problems of the lung rather than problems of hard rock and asbestos mining"⁸. This same reductionism leads society to build a dam that causes mercury poisoning in the lake downstream over time. This occurs because the complex interactions in an ecosystem were not taken into consideration.

In contrast, Environmentalists and Naturopaths seek to evaluate ecosystems as a whole and the relationships between the various parts. Naturopathic physicians evaluate the "dynamic, constantly shifting relationships of one functional system with another, always within the context of the whole system. No aspects of the personality or body function as independent, discrete entities"⁹. Chinese medicine identifies the balance or imbalances between Wood, Air, Fire, Water, Metal and Earth. Homeopathy examines the themes running through the mental, emotional and physical aspects of a person.

By the same token, disease itself is not a discrete entity that is separate from the whole. Rather, disease is incorporated into the whole system and therefore must be treated in its context. For this reason, while Naturopathic medicine addresses pathology in a reductionist sense, it treats the person, not the disease.

Human Health as a Microcosm

By reconnecting people with their immediate environment (their body) Naturopathic medicine has the opportunity to connect people to all of Nature. "Taking care of one's own health is taking responsibility for the fragment of the Universe which is closest to one, expressing a reverence toward life through oneself"¹⁰. Completing a diet diary, answering detailed questions, and recording basal body temperature can help patients begin a caring, attentive relationship with their bodies. Patients begin to understand that, as an whole environment, the body will always be changing, moving towards and away from homeostasis. They learn to observe how sugar impacts mood and how living conditions effect their health. Rather than a static machine to be tinkered with, patients come to view their body as a dynamic organism that can be observed, listened to, and nurtured through healthy choices.

Not only does Naturopathy foster a connection with the self, but by helping to heal one part (a human), Naturopaths help to heal the planet. "What damages one person damages all people, what injures the earth injures me. Conversely, to restore and preserve the health of one body and mind is to foster the well-being on the whole, the earth and all life upon it"¹¹. In seeking out healthier choices such as organic food, naturopathic patients naturally choose what is healthier for the environment. For example, in nutrition, "we must replenish the balance of microorganisms in our intestines as we replenish the land upon which we grow our food. We can develop natural, less destructive means to control organisms in the fields and in our bodies without upsetting global and gut ecology"¹². Truly preventative medicine happens as we understand that human health and the health of the planet are one.

Room to Grow - Key Areas for Environmental Considerations in Naturopathy

Mind-Body Medicine

One of the inherent dangers we run into as Naturopaths when practising Mind-Body medicine, is how to facilitate a mind-body connection without having patients feel they must "control" their body with their mind. It is deeply rooted in our culture that, "as representative of nature, the body is distinct from and lower than the mind. It is a resource to cultivate, manipulate, train"¹³. How can we promote harmony in a person when one part tries to dominate another? How do we broach the mental/emotional causes of disease without creating guilt in the patient? How do we break through a dualistic view of the body to explain that each part, mind & body, Yin & Yang, cannot

exist without the other? This only comes through careful dialogue with our patients along with their own willingness to understand . Perhaps they can comprehend that the body must be supported for the mind to be at ease and the mind must be supported for the body to be at ease. Perhaps when we hear phrases like "train myself" or "get this disease under my control" or "discipline this body of mine", we can take a step back to ensure harmony, not domination, so as to call upon the principles of Naturopathic medicine.

Naturopaths as Caretakers of the Natural Health Industry

Capitalism drives most of the natural health industry, making it essential for Naturopaths to be critical readers at minimum, and ideally, become active in ensuring that we prescribe safe and sustainable products. Private companies will not voluntarily research or advertise side effects, ensure safe packaging or respect endangered species. We must either enact bilaws to force them to do this or exert political pressure as consumers. In some cases our supplements are contained in plastic bottles with carcinogenic materials¹⁴. In other cases, such as certain Chinese patents, our supplements contain endangered animal parts. Naturopaths swear in our Naturopathic Oath, to "First, do no harm" and to "protect the earth for future generations". Therefore it is up to us as "expert consumers" to determine safety standards that include the safety of our planet, its dying species, and its dump sites.

At regular intervals, the environmental movement pushes for environmental degradation to be placed as a cost into business equations. We as doctors can do the same. Until a monetary value is placed on clean air, water, and sustainability, companies will continue to neglect our health and the health of our planet. A dollar value should be charged for each piece of pollution delivered to our lakes and each ounce of organochlorines to our livestock. Human health and the health of our planet are one. In this way, our scope of practice extends to include the well-being of our planet.

Conclusion

Biomedical doctors are caring healers who often save lives. But there is no doubt that the philosophy of Biomedicine is deeply flawed. It embodies the Western attitude of separation and domination over Nature and makes an enemy of natural processes. In contrast, Naturopathic medicine is based on an ecological philosophy of health. It looks beyond the quick technical fix to find the root causes of illness. It encourages diverse epistemologies and accepts limitations. Naturopathy acts according to the Healing Power of Nature and considers the ecosystem as a whole. As a profession, one of our many challenges is prevention and cure in a holistic sense, which includes helping to prevent environmental degradation and working to restore ecological balance.

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