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M.D. or N.D.?

Licensing naturopathic doctors could give New Yorkers a new health care choice

By MARIA PASCUCCI
Special to The News
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Daniel Zakroczemski/Buffalo News

Four years ago, doctors told Diane Paradise that her cancer had returned. This time, though, she couldn't bear the thought of fighting the disease a second time. She refused treatment. "I told my friends and family that I was going to love life and enjoy it to the fullest, and whatever happened happened," she said.

What happened was that she discovered an alternative form of therapy that she believes saved her life. Today, says the 35-year-old two-time cancer survivor, her quality of life is "pretty darn good."

When Paradise was diagnosed with lymphocyte-predominant Hodgkin's Disease at 25, she went through chemotherapy and radiation. The treatment sent her cancer into remission. But the regimen was so painful she vowed never to go through it again.

"The pain was so intense that I couldn't possibly sleep," said the Rochester native. "I felt like my nerve endings were at my skin at every inch of my body. No one could reach over and touch me; it hurt. It hurt to wear clothes, it hurt to lie in bed."

But as bad as the ordeal was, the treatment worked. She went into remission for five years, and the doctors told her she was essentially cured. Then year six came, and her cancer returned. This time, determined not to go through the agony of radiation and chemo again, she refused conventional treatment.

She went away on vacation in September 2001, and, as it changed the course of so many lives, 9/11 changed Diane Paradise's life as well.

"September 11 changed everything, because

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Andrew Norman/Buffalo News
"Part of our oath as doctor is teacher," says Dr. Maria Herod. "We teach patients preventative medicine and how to take responsibility for their health care."

I realized that a whole lot of people died that day who had absolutely no choice, and I had a choice and I was choosing to die, and there had to be a better way," she said.

Her better way came in the form of naturopathic medicine. She flew to an alternative cancer treatment center in

Arizona and four years later tells about the "total mind-body-spirit approach" that saved her life. She received 50,000 to 100,000 milligrams of Vitamin C intravenously and also was given 60 to 80 different vitamins and supplements designed to boost her immune system. She sold everything she owned and left her family and friends to fly across the country to do it. She's still thousands of dollars in debt, but, as she puts it, "I'm alive."

Another treatment option

This isn't about testimonials, magic potions and promises of money-back guarantees on infomercials. For Paradise, her treatment is all about having an option for when conventional medicine either fails or you simply choose not to use it. Fourteen states and Washington, D.C., recognize naturopathic medicine as a legitimate treatment. New York could be the 15th state to do so.

A bill is in the Higher Education Committee of the State Senate and Assembly that, if passed, would license accredited naturopathic doctors and establish a state board for naturopathic medicine. Sponsored by Sen. Dale Volker and Assemblyman Sam Hoyt, the bill is supported by the New York Association of Naturopathic Physicians (NYANP). Naturopathic doctors are already licensed in Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Kansas, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Washington, D.C., and, as of this month, Idaho. They are licensed in Ontario as well.

What on Earth is a naturopathic doctor? "I am a general practice physician," said Dr. Maria Herod, the only naturopathic doctor in Buffalo who holds a doctorate from a federally accredited naturopathic medical school.

"Everything you go to your doctor for, you can go to a naturopath for. If we had a license (in New York State), we could be your general practice physicians specializing in natural medicine."

Which leads to the next question: What's natural medicine? Basically, naturopathic doctors use a variety of natural and noninvasive therapies, including clinical nutrition, herbal medicine, homeopathy, physical medicine, counseling and hydrotherapy. If you're picturing a hike in the woods to visit a holistic "doctor" in Birkenstocks who recites Thoreau while tilling his organic garden, you're not alone.

"My degree - because it says 'nature' - doesn't sound like a professional doctor," said Herod. "I have to pass board exams just like a regular M.D. I have to do clinical rotations, attend a post-graduate four-year naturopathic medical college. I'm a licensable physician."

But without a license in New York State, accredited naturopaths cannot run lab tests, give a patient an actual title for a disease, prescribe medication or perform minor surgery. However, if a patient has a diagnosis, a naturopath can work with that diagnosis, using lifestyle, nutrition and herbal treatment methods.

"If I believe or suspect a diagnosis, I can refer a patient back to their primary (physician) with a list of points and explain why I think they have something and the tests that need to be run," said Dr. Raffaella Marcantonio, a naturopath in Tonawanda. "Sometimes the doctor will go for it and sometimes he won't. It depends on the patient and it depends on his interaction with the doctor."

Marcantonio also will refer patients to specialists if the doctor isn't cooperative. "It's teaching the patient to be an advocate for themselves," she said.

Currently, anyone in New York State can call himself a naturopathic doctor. You can buy a degree online or you can attend a six-month correspondence school. The public has no way of knowing who holds a doctorate from one of the five federally accredited naturopathic medical colleges and who doesn't. Naturopathic physicians argue that their training is very similar to that of an M.D. and that they are fully qualified to diagnose and treat disease like a general practice physician.

"We have to have a bachelor's degree going in (to an accredited naturopathic medical college) with a pre-med track. Same requirements as a medical school," said Marcantonio. In Oregon, Marcantonio is a primary care physician, and she must fulfill all the requirements to maintain her licensure on a yearly basis.

"New York State doesn't license me, so I'm here" working to get the state to grant licenses

to naturopaths, Marcantonio said. "I hold my license in Oregon as a way to set and maintain a standard. Every year, I'm required to have (25 hours of) continuing education from that state, of which six of those hours are in pharmacology. These are the same standards that a medical professional has."

A difference of philosophy

The differences between an M.D. and an N.D. lie in their scope and philosophy of training. Instead of focusing on the treatment of a specific set of symptoms, naturopathic doctors treat the whole person and seek to identify and remove the underlying causes of illness.

"Going to a naturopath is a whole new experience for people," said Marcantonio. "You come in for headaches, but I'm not just asking you about your headaches. I'm asking you about every part of your body. You want to find out, where is it all coming from? What other factors can be contributing to my headaches, instead of just prescribing aspirin or some other migraine medication."

One man with a terrible ear infection who had a horrible ringing in his ear went to Herod because he's severely allergic to antibiotics. "Doctors usually don't have alternatives," she said. "We habitually overuse antibiotics, and we're becoming resistant to them."

If you're not going to get a pill, count on making a commitment to a complete lifestyle change when you visit a naturopathic doctor. "The basic naturopathic approach is to clean up your diet, live a cleaner lifestyle, watch the medications and look for food triggers - that's the gamut that everybody goes through with naturopathic because it works," said Herod, who stressed that naturopaths receive extensive nutrition training. "A lot of people are getting wiser to the fact that our food supply is a disaster, between the corn syrup, artificial sweeteners, the antibodies and the hormones in meats."

The medical community may say that they know how important a lifestyle change is in the treatment of chronic disease, but the problem is that they don't teach it to their patients, argued Marcantonio, the Tonawanda naturopath.

"My mother is a cancer survivor," she said. "I know what they told her. They said, 'Eat anything you want. It's important that you keep your weight up. Go ahead, drink milkshakes and eat chicken wings.' Now would I tell a patient who's a cancer patient that? Absolutely not."

Assemblyman Hoyt believes that naturopathic doctors must be licensed in New York State to protect an increasing number of people who are turning to alternative therapies.

"This legislation would guarantee (naturopathic doctors) are properly trained in accredited institutions, that they have clinical experience and they have an understanding of drug interactions between traditional medicine and natural medicine," he said. "I'm confident that by next year, we're going to see this bill get passed by both houses and get it signed into law."

A 2004 nationwide government survey conducted by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine and the National Center for Health Statistics found that 36 percent of U.S. adults use some form of complementary and alternative medicine. Moreover, in a 2000 survey of all 453 patients at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, 69 percent had used at least one complementary and alternative therapy, and 65 percent did not inform their oncologists.

Without access to trained specialists in natural medicine, people are going online, listening to the advice of well-meaning friends and relatives and self-medicating. Obviously, it's wonderful that patients are taking an active role in their health care, but not if they're acting without the direction of a trained physician.

"Physicians don't have the time to ask the follow-up questions they should be asking and give the advice and guidance they should be giving," said Sanford Levy, M.D., of Buffalo Medical Group. "Our health care system is based on shorter visits being better financially. Physicians constantly feel like they're racing against the clock."

Levy added that even though many doctors are aware that patients are using alternative therapies, they don't ask for reasons other than a lack of time. "The attitude is, 'Why ask? I'm not going to know what to do with the information if I get it,'" he said. For Levy, patients are best served if conventional and unconventional practitioners are working together.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know the side effects of Saint Johns Wart and the interactions with prescription drugs," said Richard M. Peer, M.D., a member of Buffalo Medical Group and president-elect of the Medical Society of the State of New York. "I don't have a problem with an internist or a family practitioner who has an interest in alternative medicine attracting a clientele of patients who would prefer to not be treated with drugs but rather take a more naturopathic approach. But why does New York State need to legitimize

another medical profession?"

It's clear, however, that Peer doesn't regard naturopaths as "real" doctors. He likened them to the folks in the old West who "went around selling these potion things that cure all that ails you from your cough to your constipation and your diarrhea all in the same bottle. That's naturopathic medicine."

Ideal is to work together

"There are benefits to all types of medicine," said Donielle Wilson, N.D. and president of the NYANP. "We're not trying to be medical doctors, and we're not trying to put (them) out of business. We're trying to provide the best care for patients, and we feel the best care comes from integrative care where medical doctors and naturopathic doctors are working together."

"The medical society isn't excited about this legislation because they tend to want to protect their own turf," Hoyt said. "I think the younger docs might have a greater appreciation of the value of naturopathic medicine and will be more open-minded about the integrative work between medical doctors and naturopathic doctors."

"Part of our oath as doctor is teacher," said Herod. "We teach patients preventative medicine and how to take responsibility for their health care."

The World Health Organization estimates that 65 to 80 percent of the world's people rely on what we call "alternative" medicine as their primary form of health care. Perhaps it's time New York State considers the possibility.

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