

The Future of Naturopathic Medicine: A Message from Karen E. Howard, Executive Director of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians

Throughout 2010, the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP) celebrates its 25th Anniversary. Looking forward in this New Year, one must wonder what future the US Congress is divining as it struggles to reform our current healthcare system. It is likely that the Senate and House of Representatives will successfully complete a conference on healthcare reform legislation and send President Obama a bill to sign into law. Will this bill be good for patients, or has compromise forced decisions that will do little to effect change?

If you have a glass half-full mentality, you understand that the virtue of patience can yield amazing opportunities. This can be the first step on the road to reform. Perhaps forcing millions more into a failing system will accomplish two things. First, people will not be at risk for losing life savings, they will no longer avoid going to the doctor for life-threatening conditions, nor will they be forced to rely on their local emergency room for healthcare. Second, in the matter of a few short years, the experts who continue to assert that our system is unsustainable might be proven correct. It is likely we will witness a collapse that will force legislators into implementing true change. Regardless, the public is demanding ownership of their health and a return to wellness. A final vote in the House and Senate is not likely to quell their voice, nor will it fulfill the objectives of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP).

The AANP's vision is to transform the healthcare system from disease management to health promotion by incorporating the principles of naturopathic medicine. The mission of the AANP is to serve our members by advancing the profession of naturopathic medicine and preserving its integrity. The question of how the AANP shows up in the world, with our long-term commitment to creating sustainable healthcare, lies at the heart of each naturopathic physician's practice and the work of the association itself.

While the number of licensed naturopathic physicians continues to grow, the AANP is working to further empower our public policy efforts by developing strong collaborative relationships with like-minded organizations representing practitioners, patients, products, and environmental interests. Our external partnerships are diverse in nature and universal in intent.

The power of the AANP's relationships enables pursuit of a broader agenda, one more fitting to the naturopathic philosophy. Working with likeminded groups adds voice to a larger, less parochial agenda. By teaming with this larger audience, we seek to establish a voice in the larger reform effort and the reengineering of healthcare reform proposals to embody a wellness model. In partnership with the associations in the natural products realm, the AANP actively advocates for passage of food stamp legislation and other public health initiatives aimed at significantly impacting health status for at-risk populations. As a leader in the Coalition for Patient Rights, whose membership of 35 organizations represents more than 3.3 million providers, the AANP is advancing a unified message to expand consumer choice and access to qualified providers.

Our purpose for engaging in partnership is to support the rights of consumers to access highly qualified practitioners of their choice. The AANP honors the credentials of each of our partners, and we are strong advocates for practitioners' rights to practice to the full extent of their abilities, education, qualifications, and legal authority. Our commitment to establishing standards for naturopathic medicine is evidenced by our work to gain licensure in all 50 states and our efforts to establish recognition at the federal level. This fall, the US Department of Labor released a new definition of "naturopathic physician" in its Occupational Information Network System (the replacement for the old Department of Labor Dictionary of Occupational Titles). The 2009 Department of Labor custom report for naturopathic physicians now defines members of our profession as people who:

"Diagnose, treat, and help prevent diseases using a system of practice that is based on the natural healing capacity of individuals. May use physiological, psychological or mechanical methods. May also use natural medicines, prescription or legend drugs, foods, herbs, or other natural remedies.

Sample job titles include Naturopathic Physician, Naturopathic Doctor, Physician, and Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine." (Occupational Information Network, 2009)

This is a monumental success for the naturopathic profession. The federal government now officially recognizes naturopathic medicine as one of 965 recognized occupations and defines the key features of this "occupation" by using a standardized, measurable set of variables. The outdated Department of Labor definition of "Naturopathic Doctor" is now null and void. This independent data will be updated on a regular basis for employers, prospective students, and educators. The new definition will stand as a cornerstone for our work to advance the profession in the following ways.

- Advocating for inclusion in all federal loan repayment programs, on par with graduates of conventional medical programs, to support naturopathic medical graduates as they pursue opportunities to support underserved populations. Legislation enumerating inclusion in the Indian Health Service loan repayment program is now moving forward in Congress.
- Advancement of state licensing efforts. Efforts in Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, and a host of other states will continue in 2010 and beyond as we aggressively seek regulation in all 50 states.
- Expansion of Scope of Practice. In the past 2 years several licensed jurisdictions have been successful in expanding the naturopathic scope of practice, and these efforts will continue.
- Inclusion in employer-funded, state-sponsored, and federal healthcare programs. The expansion of Medicaid, creation of

state-based insurance programs with the pending insurance reform legislation, and the expansion of wellness programs by self-insured employers will create enormous demand for the skills of naturopathic physicians who are perfectly qualified to provide primary care and address the needs of people suffering from chronic disease.

Each of the individual professions in the field of integrative medicine has similarly worthy and essential legislative and regulatory agendas. And we now have a unique opportunity to pursue a parallel intention that reflects our interconnectedness and vision. If you see the glass as half empty on the eve of passage of “insurance reform” legislation, you might fear we’ve lost our chance for real reform where everyone has uniform, cost-effective coverage for services that will improve their health. While very far from perfect, this legislation sets the stage for creating the new paradigm we seek—over the long term. And while we have virtually no control over the result of this effort, one thing is absolutely certain: Each of us as individuals, our professional associations, and indeed the collective commitment of our united collaborations have an obligation to be the voice of sustainable healthcare and personal empowerment—for the sake of generations to come.

Karen E. Howard serves as the Executive Director for the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP). Howard is responsible for overseeing the AANP, the nation’s only national professional organization representing licensed naturopathic physicians, and ensuring that it fulfills its mission. The AANP is committed to changing the current healthcare system from one that treats disease to one that promotes health.



In addition, the organization is actively engaged in state and national discussions with policy makers and industry experts to affect change. Howard has spent almost 25 years working with Congress, state legislatures and healthcare provider organizations to develop innovative healthcare policy and programs for public and private organizations. She has also served in a variety of executive positions and worked as a national lobbyist on Capitol Hill. Her policy experience is in mental health, managed care, integrative medicine, and natural medicine.
