

Issue Brief: Naturopaths¹

Key considerations for lawmakers considering naturopathy scope of practice expansion

The American Medical Association believes that limited licensure providers play an integral role in the delivery of health care in the United States. The health and safety of patients are threatened, however, when limited licensure providers are permitted to perform services that are not commensurate with their education or training. While some scope expansions may be appropriate, others definitely are not.

1. Multiple state legislative reports have unearthed specific shortcomings in the education, training and competency testing of naturopaths

- The Colorado Office of Examination Services found in 2005 that “[T]here is little generalizable evidence that NPLEX² Part II clinical licensing examinations actually measure clinical competence.” *In comparison:* the U.S. Medical Licensing Examination and the Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination each specifically assess whether the examinee can apply medical knowledge and understanding of biomedical and clinical science essential for the unsupervised practice of medicine.
- A 2004 sunrise report from the State of Florida concluded that there is “potential risk from licensing naturopathic physicians to allow them to provide a broad range of primary care services.”
- In 2006, a Missouri Senate committee report questioned the education and standardized testing of naturopaths, noting that the main naturopathic accrediting body has fallen “in and out of favor with the U.S. Department of Education.”

¹ All facts and figures contained in this issue brief, unless otherwise noted, have been taken from the AMA Scope of Practice Data Series for Naturopaths, September 2009.

² Naturopath Physicians Licensing Examinations

2. There is no consistent application of evidenced-based principles and scientific study for naturopathic treatments

- Some naturopathic-recommended treatments, such as using St. John’s wort for HIV-positive individuals, has been found by the National Institutes of Health to interact with protease inhibitors and significantly *decrease* their concentration in the blood.
- The claim that a treatment has been used “for hundreds of years,” is not a substitute for randomized clinical trials and other rigorous scientific inquiry.
- In several studies funded by the National Center for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine, the efficacy of naturopathic treatments is not supported by clinical evidence. (*For example: Ginkgo extract was found to produce no reduction in progression to dementia compared to a placebo; and shark cartilage supplement does not extend lives of lung cancer patients.*)

3. Naturopathy may have been in existence for more than 100 years, but modern accreditation standards as well as education and training standards show several shortcomings

- No entrance exam, such as the Medical College Admissions Test is required of applicants to schools of naturopathy.
- Compared to medical school and residency training, naturopathy has relatively few contact hours of study on pharmacological treatment of disease and little clinical reinforcement of pharmaceutical intervention on patients during clinical rotations or optional post-graduate training.
- Graduates of four-year naturopathic programs take a standard examination that only measures their competency compared to other naturopathic practitioners – without regard to any equivalency with medical board licensing.
- Clinical education for naturopaths typically begins in the third year of study, and graduates only are required to complete 720 hours of direct patient care over two

years. In comparison, that is roughly *two months* of study of a first-year resident for a graduate of an accredited U.S. medical or osteopathic school of medicine.³

4. There is severe disagreement among naturopaths regarding licensure and increasing naturopathic scope of practice

- The American Naturopathic Medical Association actively *opposes* licensure because, in large part, “Naturopaths, Naturopathic Doctors or Naturopathic Physicians have no business diagnosing, dispensing drugs, or performing surgeries. [They] simply don’t have the experience or education required.”

Conclusion

The American Medical Association opposes the licensure of naturopaths and encourages legislatures to closely examine efforts by naturopaths to enact state licensure laws or expand their current scopes of practice, which may be potentially harmful and interfere with the public interest to deliver safe, quality care under legislatively authorized state scopes of practice.

³ Naturopathic post-graduate education is not required of graduates except in Utah, which has a one-year requirement.