

Enable the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to Hire Naturopathic Physicians

What is the ‘Win-Win’ Goal Sought by Licensed Naturopathic Physicians?

Licensed naturopathic physicians are not currently credentialed to work within the VHA and seek that ability. As described below, there is every reason to believe that America’s veterans – especially those beset by chronic illness – would benefit from treatment by naturopathic physicians.

Who Are Naturopathic Physicians and What Do They Do?

Naturopathic physicians are trained in the use of safe and effective natural therapies, in addition to conventional therapies, in order to help patients maintain good health and to treat health problems. This approach often has the effect of reducing or eliminating the need for drugs or surgery. Licensed naturopathic doctors (NDs) have attended a four-year, federally accredited post-graduate naturopathic medical school and have passed national licensing exams. Their training emphasizes illness prevention, proactive self-care (such as nutrition and stress reduction), and chronic disease treatment aimed at helping the body heal itself.

Would Naturopathic Medicine Be Effective for Treating Veterans?

There is considerable evidence that naturopathic medicine is effective at treating numerous chronic conditions that affect America’s veterans, among them chronic pain, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, anxiety, and depression.ⁱ These conditions can be alleviated through the use of natural therapies; veterans would likewise benefit from a reduction in the number of drugs they are prescribed, which often have numerous side effects.

What Has the VHA Said about NDs and the Integrative Approach They Take?

Tracy Gaudet, MD, who directs the VHA’s Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, has stated unequivocally that bringing licensed NDs into the VHA is consistent with the agency’s goals of personalized, proactive, and patient driven healthcare.ⁱⁱ

Her perspective is buttressed by the results of a dialogue between the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health of NIH, the Department of the Defense, and the VHA concerning the need for fresh approaches to treating chronic pain in veterans.ⁱⁱⁱ The group’s 2015 report included the following findings:

- Instead of focusing on a single complementary healthcare modality, research should focus on an integrated package of non-pharmacologic modalities that could be individualized.
- Care should be personalized, proactive, and patient-driven.

These statements describe naturopathic medicine, as it is an integrative approach to patient care that spans various modalities, is tailored to individual patients, focuses on non-invasive and non-pharmacologic therapies, and aims to educate and empower patients so that they take responsibility for their health through good diet, exercise, sleep, hydration, breathing, and stress reduction.

What do America's Veterans Think?

A survey of a representative sample of America's veterans was conducted in March 2015 by the national survey firm Infosurv for the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP). The survey, which has an error range of +/- 4.9%, disclosed the following:

- Nearly two-thirds of veterans (64%) would prefer a doctor who prescribes natural therapies *before* considering drugs or surgery.
- Nearly three-quarters of veterans (73%) would consider seeing a naturopathic physician if he or she were on staff at a nearby VHA facility.
- Younger veterans (under 40 years of age) are the most likely to say they would consider seeing a naturopathic physician.

Additionally, the survey found that 12% of respondents are located more than 50 miles from a VHA medical facility. These veterans would undoubtedly benefit from being able to visit a naturopathic doctor in private practice located closer to where they live.

Is the VHA Incorporating Integrative Healthcare?

The VHA is committed to providing integrative healthcare to veterans, especially for those who live with chronic conditions that are resistant to a conventional or quick fix. The agency's watchwords for care – "personalized, proactive, and patient-driven" – reflect the approach inherent in integrative treatment. In establishing the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation – and in establishing 9 regional Centers of Innovation – the VHA is beginning to make real its intent to bring integrative healthcare to veterans.

Why Can't Licensed NDs Work at the VHA?

Very simply, naturopathic physicians can work for the VHA only if they are assigned a code found in the federal government's *Handbook of Occupational Groups and Families* – or if a customized employment code is created for them.

Where Does the Opportunity Stand Now?

In October 2015, members of the House of Representatives sent a letter to Secretary Robert McDonald of the VA, urging that steps be taken to begin hiring licensed NDs. David Shulkin, MD, director of the VHA, replied, saying that before an employment code can be created, the agency must determine an appropriate role for NDs to play.

As a roadmap for that decision, AANP provided the VHA's Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation with a white paper setting out the training and capabilities that NDs bring, the benefits that will accrue to the VA and to veterans once NDs are hired, and several different roles that NDs could serve within the agency.

The VHA is now considering the matter. AANP expects that, after creating employment codes for chiropractors and acupuncturists, licensed naturopathic physicians will be put on the same track. There is exceptionally good reason to include licensed NDs in the spectrum of healthcare professionals employed within the VHA.

ⁱ "Naturopathic Medicine: Cost Saving Disease Prevention and Health Improvement." Compilation of studies, American Association of Naturopathic Physicians. April 2013. [http://www.naturopathic.org/files/Naturopathic%20Medicine%20Works%20-%20AANP%20Collected%20References%202013-04-11\(1\).pdf](http://www.naturopathic.org/files/Naturopathic%20Medicine%20Works%20-%20AANP%20Collected%20References%202013-04-11(1).pdf).

ⁱⁱ Dr. Tracy Gaudet, comments presented to AANP's 2013 Legislative Conference. Washington DC, May 13, 2013. <http://www.naturopathic.org/advocacy>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "NCCIH working group recommends large-scale collaborative research into pain management: Proposed research to focus on nondrug approaches to help active military and veterans." National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. National Institutes of Health. February 9, 2015. <https://nccih.nih.gov/news/press/020915>.