

Naturopathic Doctors Provide Primary Care

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New Mexico and Idaho recently licensed naturopathic doctors, the latest states to recognize graduates from four-year accredited naturopathic medical schools are trained and educated to provide primary care. These state legislative victories take place against a backdrop of dire physician shortages across America, with rural and underserved areas hardest hit. In New Mexico, where primary care provider shortage is extreme, Juliette Sweet, ND, President of the New Mexico Association of Naturopathic Physicians, says, ?Naturopathic Doctors blend natural medicine with conventional diagnosis and treatment. We can offer quality care to the communities of New Mexico and serve as primary care providers, greatly needed in our state.? Greg Schmedes MD, state representative from New Mexico spoke at the public legislature hearing to share that licensing naturopathic doctors, ?will reduce the cost of health care, increase access to healthcare and increase quality.?

Over the past decade, a growing number of states have begun turning to NDs to provide primary care. Insurance payors, Medicaid, or state laws in Washington, Oregon, Hawaii, Vermont, New Mexico and Idaho all do so. Licensed naturopathic doctors in Oregon and Vermont have been appointed to serve on the state?s healthcare workforce committees, charged with finding solutions to shortages in the provider healthcare workforce.

Studies have shown that having a primary care provider supports access to healthcare services, offers improved health outcomes, and reduces both emergency room visits and hospitalizations. Primary care can also lessen the impact of poor economic status on patient and community health. Keeping risk factors like cholesterol level, blood pressure and blood sugar in control, helps prevent hospitalization and death related to stroke and heart attack.

In a 2019 update from the American Association of Medical Colleges, we learn the US will be short nearly 122,000 physicians by 2032. The main cause of these projected devastating shortages is the aging of both doctors and patients. In addition, health care needs are changing as more patients suffer with serious chronic health problems and quick fixes are hard to find. The average wait time to see a new doctor is over a month in many areas. Licensed naturopathic doctors can help both fill the gap in shortage and shift the focus to preventive, whole person medicine.

Michelle Simon ND and CEO of the Institute for Natural Medicine and licensed naturopathic doctor says, ?I am heartened to see new states utilizing naturopathic doctors to the full extent of their training. I am deeply concerned about the critical shortage of doctors. Health care policy makers can take note of the training, education, and capacity of licensed naturopathic doctors to help fill this gap. To change the course of galloping chronic disease, early intervention focused on lower force methods holds the most hope for better health outcomes and for positive impact on the economics of healthcare. Diet, lifestyle, and nutrition are foundational elements missing from the vast majority of healthcare encounters and are areas where naturopathic doctors have expertise. Licensing all fifty state will help reduce the doctor shortage across America.?

Laura Farr, Executive Director of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians agrees, ?We see licensed naturopathic doctors working with Medicaid patients, in the Veterans Administration, in underserved areas, hospitals and urgent care clinics. Increasingly, institutions and policy makers appreciate that collaboration among different types of providers is a key in meeting the healthcare needs of the future.?

And the body of research on whole-person naturopathic treatment supports its adoption across the country. In a recent study, whole-person, multi-modality naturopathic medicine shows efficacy for the treatment of ?cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal pain, type 2 diabetes, polycystic ovary syndrome, depression, anxiety, and a range of complex chronic conditions.?

For further information please contact the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians or the Institute for Natural Medicine.

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