

A History of Naturopathy

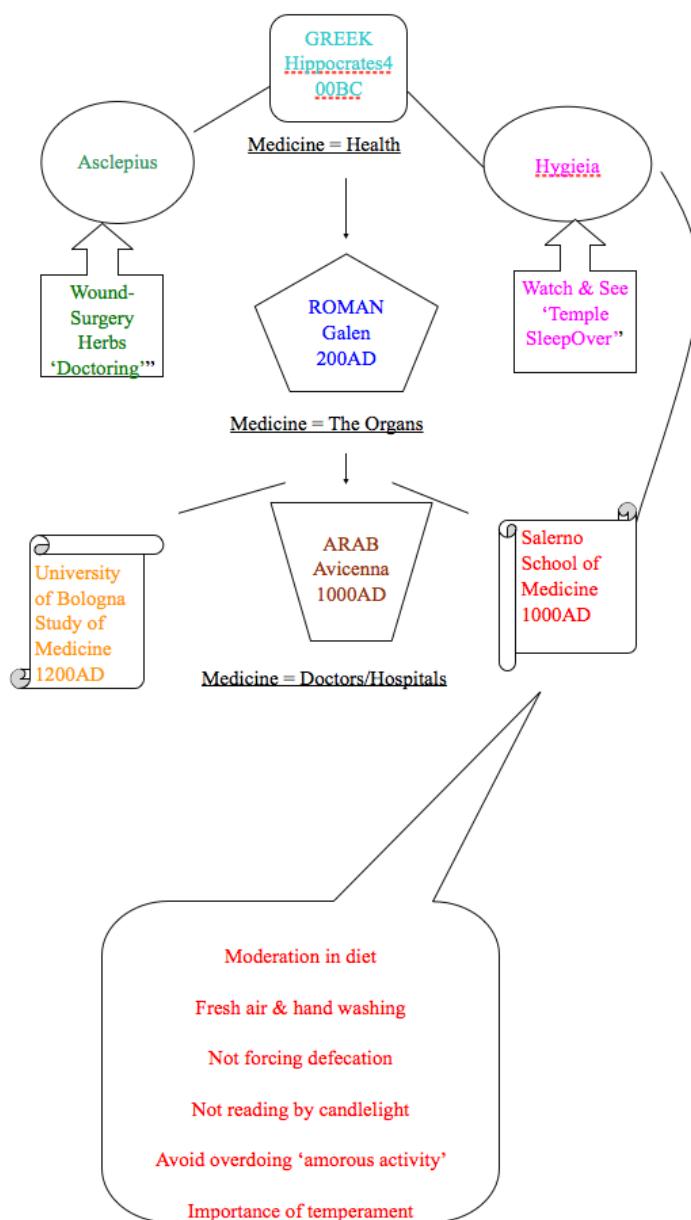
“Don’t Know Where We’re Going ‘Till We Know Where We’ve Been”

Naturopathy relates to an impulse within us as old as humankind, a fusion of instinct and intuition, native mechanisms that are responsible for our development and wellbeing. Original methods of healthcare, such as are still found in India and China, acknowledged this synthesis but in the West, for political as much as theoretical reasons, there was a gradual shift towards an exclusively physiological attitude.

The advantage offered by the latter was that we began to unlock the secrets of the human body, but as the naturopathic revolution in 19th Europe revealed, direct benefits to health from narrow scientific investigation alone are inadequate.

The re-humanizing impact of naturopathic pioneering was seismic, and can be sensed in the gradual absorption of holistic principles into modern healthcare. This return towards a truly integrated health, one that recognizes the whole person, invites our impetus today.

Why did naturopathy need to be pioneered in the 19th and championed in the 20th century? And what does naturopathy have to offer present times? The answers to these questions may be explored through a review of the practice of medicine. We shall see that in the sphere of health, history also has a habit of repeating itself – is the challenge for 21st century naturopathy to make another health revolution unnecessary?



At Salerno, according to impartial medical observers, we have the last recording of 'medicine equals health' for nearly nine centuries. The intervening period was characterized by spectacular advances in medical science - in anatomy (Vesalius 1514), the discovery of the primary circulation (Harvey 1600), the use of the microscope (Galilei 1600), and the great discoveries of Spallanzani (1750) - yet simple health measures such as hygienic washing of the body were discouraged.

Therapeutic intervention was undistinguished and haphazard. Remedies were used either because they always had been or on the recommendation of someone of importance. A potion devised by Galen and still in use in the 18th century contained goat dung and snakeheads; its only virtue being that by being boiled for so long its constituents might have become sterilized. Only after the work of Withering (1785) on digitalis, from the plant foxglove, was a standard set for future studies on the actions of drugs. Of the contributions of Jenner (1800) and Pasteur (1850), much was made, but we now know the full story.

By virtue of their Latin education, physicians claimed superiority over unregulated surgical practice. They held that resort to surgery was an admission of failure rather than a skill, delegated to monks, or unlearned people who had honed their technique from castrating animals. In fact surgery, while primitive by today's standards, developed pragmatically and was probably a much safer option. Pare (1550), a French barber- surgeon rose to the highest ranks of surgery not only by his adoption of more humane technique but also by his Hippocratic attitude of 'letting well alone': "I dressed him. God healed him".

But such was the professional rivalry; only in 1800 did surgery claim equal footing with prescribing. (Brambilla). However, it would be another 50 years before anesthesia was introduced - from the recreational substance 'ether', promoted in the USA (Wells, Green). At around the same time, to the great benefit of medical practice generally, hygienic measures reintroduced and the first sanitary institutions appeared (Nightingale 1850).

Amidst the discoveries, the successes and the catastrophes of evolving medicine, the voice of Hippocrates could occasionally be heard calling, never more so than in the person of the celebrated English physician Thomas Sydenham (1650) - the 'English Hippocrates'. Sydenham prescribed when he felt it was useful but he acknowledged the limitation of remedies, and cautioned against scientific discoveries for their own sake. (Of smallpox, he noted that if handled conservatively, "It was the safest and slight of all diseases".) His clinical experience led him to a principle that was destined to become a central tenet of naturopathy two hundred years later:

"Symptoms represent Nature's attempt to shake off disease. Observe the course of illness, record what you observe, and interfere as little as possible with the natural process of healing".



19th Century

The Medium was the Message: WATER

When the voice of Hippocrates reasserted itself in the late 19th century, it sought out not only suitable personalities but also a medium. That medium was the element, which dominates our planet, and our physical bodies: water. There had been sporadic interest in the use of water as a medicine by medical commentators, but it was in the personality of Silesian farmer Vincent Priessnitz that hydrotherapy would find its champion. (The name hydrotherapy of course is misleading, for its active agency is temperature, but water is unbeatable for adaptability.)

At first, Priessnitz observed how his herds were attracted to water when unwell or injured. He then applied the principle to himself with great success, and soon he was much in demand by his neighbours. From thence his fame spread, and while not without his detractors, no less than a Royal Commission of Inquiry vindicated his methods.

Louis Khune was a successful industrialist with a scientific leaning. After his health broke down he found disappointment with orthodox treatment, and after pursuing his own research and building on the teachings of Priessnitz, he formulated a comprehensive nature cure regime. He was perhaps the greatest contributor of the early reformers. Already famous for the sanitarium he had established in Leipzig, when his book *The New Science of Healing* (1894) was published it was a sensation; within a short time it had appeared in 25 languages, including Urdu. He also developed what he thought a revolutionary method of assessment for his clients, "The Science of Facial Expression" (co-incidentally a mainstay of Chinese Traditional Medicine). Khune also recorded the outcomes of his treatments, compared with the options offered by orthodox treatment at the time, which makes for sobering reading.

Khune's definition of health was typically uncompromising of the early pioneers: A healthy person always feels well; he knows nothing of pain or discomfort so long as they are not from external causes; in fact he never feels that he has a body. He delights in work and finds happiness in sweet repose. For him it is easy to bear mental anguish for his body yields for his assuagement the soothing balm of tears, of which, in such a case, even a man need not be ashamed. (Another version can be summarized in his attitude to the use of toilet paper.)

The early pioneers aimed to wean medical practice from the purely biological focus of the scientific method, by providing what it so obviously lacked: vigorous as water treatments can be, they allowed for people to be handled, to be cared for. Constitutionally, people were perhaps more rugged than today, arguably better nourished, and the health sanitariums offered the basic environment for other natural health methods to be developed. However, early Nature Cure was not only for those in 'high society' or the 'worried well'. Of the impact of natural health on the scourge of the time, cholera, we have this report from an orthodox source:

The new treatment relies very greatly on so-called natural methods. The patient is bathed and nursed and carefully tended but rarely given medicine. In comparison with other treatments, it was perfectly certain that the new practitioners lost no more of their patients than other doctors. There was but one conclusion: that most drugs had no effect whatsoever.

20th Century

Eating our way to Health

The spread of natural methods gained momentum as curious doctors came to investigate the ways of the new practitioners, especially for conditions resistant to their methods. Distinct from this pattern was the experience of Swiss doctor Maximilian Bircher-Benner. Bircher-Benner's contribution is distinguished in two ways. Not only was he the first from his conventional background to champion the importance of nutrition on health, but also his emphasis on fresh, raw food was revolutionary, given that vitamins had not yet been 'discovered'. More significantly, perhaps, was that he came to this realization from information given by a patient. The doctor listens to the patient!

After conducting his practice in the usual way for a few years, Bircher-Benner had met a woman who had been suffering from a gastric disorder. No treatment had helped her and finally she was unable to digest any food at all. In desperation, a friend of hers suggested a diet of raw vegetables and fruit, and to everyone's amazement she recovered completely. In time, clinical confirmation enabled Bircher-Benner to refute the contemporary notion of a high protein diet, especially when unwell. Because he was not attacking medicine, Bircher-Benner anticipated recognition for his findings from colleagues, but instead faced hostility. The old Swiss saying was never so true: 'What the farmer does not know, he does not eat!'

Undaunted, Bircher-Benner founded a clinic in Zurich which became world famous for its adoption of the Hippocratic ideal. The 'Father of Muesli' was first and foremost a doctor and had little time for writing, but in a letter to his son in the year before his death, he reveals:

In his understanding the doctor should be more than a health plumber who repairs the body by interventions outwardly with cuts, splashes and medication. The doctor has to do with people, with his wrong connection to the body, to the soul, to the environment; with his whole human tragedy, with mankind condensed in him, with his complexes all to human. And how lightly (easily) degenerates the doctor to..... physician.

USA

The expansion of the natural health movement shifted to the USA in the early 20th century, where the concern for healthy eating made for rapid development. Although there was enthusiasm for all the fundamental ideals, including hydrotherapy, food became a natural health focus, which continues up to the present day. Whether a country or city dweller, food offered a route back to nature; people had also become increasingly aware of the commercialization of basic foods, brought to light by Graham earlier. Encouraged by Lust and Lindlahr, enthusiasm for training in natural health was such that by the 1920's, practitioners were estimated to be in thousands. (The term 'naturopath', perhaps with reference to 'osteopath', was born in 1902.)

A predominantly lay-organized, food inspired movement was one, which at first the newly organized American medical association had little interest in. At any rate, sophisticated medical practice was just beginning and training of doctors themselves had been a matter of concern. However, professional sensitivities rose to the surface as far as the wider implications of nature cure were concerned, especially in relation to explanation of illness.

It was no surprise, therefore, that legislation favoring scientific medicine was introduced. The 1912 Carnegie commissioned report on medicine, bringing its practice into alliance with the pharmaceutical industry set the tone; henceforth other approaches to medicine would be denigrated and ostracized as quackery.

Granted, some practitioners were enthusiastic critics of medicine, but it seems bizarre that health practitioners were regularly charged with 'practicing medicine without a license' - for simply encouraging people to rely less on medicine and more on food. (Shelton, who had his share of convictions, was apparently a mild-mannered man but legend has it that he was advised by his wife to 'get mad' in his writings.)

Meanwhile, in UK Lindlahr's protégés Lief and Thomson had returned home to set up well-received centers in London and Edinburgh, respectively, and training schools were opened. An added respectability was given from an old tradition of lay healing enshrined in an Act of Parliament.

Of the two men, Thomson was the most fervent and in prolific writings he reveled in baiting orthodoxy while championing natural methods. Thomson claimed to have on file a message sent by the American Medical Association, who were unfamiliar with UK law, to the British Medical Association on how to respond less aggressively to the public's growing interest in nature cure, since persecution might only add to nature cure's popularity:

"Lay off the Nature Cure people. Let anybody practise and let anybody call himself a practitioner – don't insist on any training and the public will soon lose interest.

Show interest in what an experimenting patient tells you; make no commentary except to note how well the patient is looking. Imply that after all, this improvement is exactly what you had hoped for as the final result of your own earlier advice and treatment. Then, thank the patient for bringing the matter to your attention, and close the interview with the remark that the new technique is 'most interesting, I will look into it'. The average patient will go away quite convinced that he must have over-valued the benefits he had been receiving at the hands of the new practitioner - surely if it had been as wonderful as he had imagined, the doctor would have heard about it."

However, despite successful practice in its own right and making significant in-roads to receptive orthodox minds, the middle part of the 20th century did not see the blossoming of natural health.

Enthusiasm seems to have been diverted into the stronger body of chiropractice in the USA, where nature cure appeared to take refuge, as it did within osteopathy in the UK. Perhaps pure nature cure was harder to maintain from an office practice, and the residential centers, whose ideals were labor intensive, became too expensive to run. Being few and far between, in-patient set ups were also very vulnerable to their occasional mistakes. Training schools gradually closed and it was nearly 1980 before signs of a revival in the organization of naturopathy emerged.

Thomson managed to keep the momentum going in the UK until 1986, when his clinic closed, but he had a family of practitioners to help sustain him. In the USA, Shelton carried the torch for longer than any of the pioneers. Passing at 90 years, he lived nearly twice as long as Priessnitz, but some consider that he paid the price - twice over.

Rediscovery of the Body – Through the Spirit

Although the scientific approach had succeeded in producing a knowledgeable, sanitary healthcare, its prized armamentarium was showing less consistency. Few modern medicines were without that familiar whiff of the medieval potion. Indeed, in a sleight of hand worthy of the conjuror, the term "side effects" had to be coined to designate "unwanted effects". This feature of allopathic treatment, culminated in the thalidomide tragedy, a scandal whose proportions were impossible to conceal. It has sometimes been described as the moment the conscience of modern medicine was pricked.

On a wider front, the late 20th century also witnessed a convergence of the world's cultures. To a new Western generation, detached from colonialism, Oriental influences attracted close attention. India welcomed the world to its centers of spirit. It became possible to visit China. The philosophies of indigenous peoples as diverse as Native Americans and Australian aborigines were found to resonate with Hygieia's principles. Modern medicine, in contrast, appeared to be a superficial, if necessary, aspect of the total requirement for health.

The co-incident of these events was to have a profound influence on the future of healthcare. Not for the first time, but with greater urgency, questions were raised within the profession about what role medicine should play in modern society. Not least, it was proposed that modern medicine might in fact be in danger of harboring a dangerous set of preconceived ideas and outmoded attitudes, posing as the latest scientific thinking. Doctoring would never be the same again.

21st Century –

“The Simpler Life is the demand of the hour. The confusions of a complex civilization, the disintegration of the old-fashioned home, the distractions of international discord, the perplexity of the individual mind wavering between the evolution of Science and the revolution of Theology—all these disturbing elements have settled moodily into a sense of universal unrest, that pervades the mingled atmosphere of nations.”

Few would argue that Emil Just's sentiments are not as relevant today as they were when he wrote the preface to his book *Return to Nature!* in 1903. Just has set up a nature cure retreat in Germany, and he associated with nature cure with salvation of the soul. While his critics argued that this was more romanticism than medicine, we can see that this was the beginning of a transition to holism whose effects we are witnessing today. From being a 19th century reactionary movement to a 20th century reforming influence, naturopath now finds itself in alliance with the major causes of our times - the bionetwork, food and agriculture, and give or take a few pockets of resistance, our former antagonists the medics.

Health Ecology

Our past has been about renewal and reaffirming Hippocrates. What now?

The clearest contrast with former times, when practitioners were a rarity, would seem that now all people are called upon to be naturopaths. For our survival, everyone will be required to orient themselves towards an enlightened view of their body and environment. Although it has taken time for the message to sink in, the maxim 'the illness is the cure' now applies equally to the planet and the person.

While a naturopathic consultation or short stay in a health centre might stimulate the revolution to a healthy life, we know that the real work takes place in the home.

The whole effort that has been involved in resurrecting the Hippocratic ideal can sometimes obscure the simple truth that nature cure is what happens in the home. Where if born we thrive better; where, although we can search the world, the causes and the cures to our problems can be found; where we have most say in how we consume the earth's resources; and where, if given the choice, most would prefer to pass on our way. Naturopathy is not a philosophy that can correct or convert – it is more accurately an expression of ecology.

Role Defined

That traditional naturopathy might not strictly be an 'opathy', with its technical connotations is too late to discuss. That the expression 'nature cure' itself lends itself to multiple definitions can also be a distraction for clients. Neither label does justice to our actual involvement: as practitioners, we are guides much more than technicians; even in our therapy, we succeed more from explaining and showing rather than doing. In other respects, although mistakes might have been made in good faith, we have maintained integrity.

But in one fundamental area we may have been presumptuous. We assert that nature cures – yet it would be more truthful to say that nature can cure and more likely as a form of 'trade in'. Perhaps the oft-quoted example of the readily healed broken bone should be tempered by our practical experience that it is not always so simple with a broken heart. In reality, we offer hope rather than cure and we may have misled in building naturopathy into a philosophy – it might just be enough to encourage people to be philosophical about falling ill.

Patient Practitioners

Having reinforced the basic requirements for health, naturopathy facilitates access to our intuition, where we can begin to understand and co-operate with the healing process. Here, the practitioner's role in consultation is focused as the unhurried listener. Especially where the route to health seems blocked, and causes are being investigated, the rule is: listen not only for the cause, but also the cause of the cause – which is so often a fear.

The term 'psycho-somatic' was once fashionable in medicine, to explain symptoms otherwise diagnosable, but it soon became a convenient way of 'blaming' the body, and led to the nebulous concept of 'stress.' It might have been better explained as the sometimes unnerving dynamic which is constantly being played out within us - between the sophisticated and the raw, the self and the conscience, between love and hate - conflicts which make us, according to Bircher-Benner, 'all too human'. How daunting to be human!

In the conversation between Fear and the Plague about the old days, it was Fear who boasted more victims. Now, there has probably never been a time where human life has been so secure, so sheltered and insured, yet many people seem to be filled with fear. We are nowadays afraid of the wind, rain and cold; we are frightened of small innocent creatures; we are frightened of open space, of the dark. All relatively harmless, but the latter hinting at the most frightening of all - the unknown. By contrast, real fears can be life saving. It is entirely human to want to run away from a perceived threat; in the natural environment it would give us time to assess danger. But if our honest fears are denied, whether felt as anxiety, panic, impatience or mere shyness, a deep confusion can arise and irrational thoughts tend to predominate, spirits plummet.

It is through mutual understanding that we can complement the work of the medical scientists who began to unlock the secret of the human body, by accompanying our client in the exploration of mind and spirit. Not psychologically or theologically, but as fellow souls, without the pressure of therapy or worse, cure - for cure, we need to remember, is not what everyone is expecting of us.

Naturopath Alec Milne, successor to Lindlahr-trained James C. Thomson, claims that in helping to untangle the products of conflict and ignorance in human nature, we are the true inheritors of Hippocrates. By affirming that the better part of cure is prevention; in validating the need to be successfully unwell; not instructing but educating; in coaxing rather than demanding, we enable our clients to begin to know themselves and the purpose of their health:

"And if that isn't Nature Cure it will have to do, until the real thing comes along!"

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