



## The Skeptics SA guide to Naturopathy

**Naturopathy** is one of the more popular forms of alternative therapy; the term being generally applied to therapies, “derived from a phenomenon of nature and ... used to stimulate the body to heal itself.” (Bradley, 1999, p 48). These include herbal medicines, various dietary and nutrition programmes, Homeopathy, Hydrotherapy, Osteopathy and Chiropractic, as well as Acupuncture, and various other types of oriental medicine.

However, few realize that, like many alternative therapies, Naturopathy, is based on vitalistic concepts, that is, the belief that all living creatures contain a form of energy that not only gives life, but is also the basis of good or bad health.

The concept of this ‘healing’ force is quite ancient, and has been known by many names over the centuries. The ancient Egyptians called it the *Ba* while the Greeks referred to it as *vis medicatrix naturae*; later it was known as animal magnetism, Odyle, and the *elixir vitae*. Whatever its name, it referred to the idea of a natural healing power of nature, an attempt by the ancients to explain what we now understand to be the process of homeostasis, the ability of the body to maintain health and recover from illness. Naturopaths claim to

work closely with this natural healing process, the *vis medicatrix naturae*.

They deny that diseases, as such, exist, rather they believe that as long as the natural energy flows properly within the body, the individual remains healthy, however, should the flow be ‘blocked’ the individual will become sick! In their view, what orthodox medicine perceives as ‘sickness’ are simply facets of these blockages. On this basis they believe that, to restore good health, it is necessary to restore the energy flow. To re-establish the flow of energy they use various natural techniques.

Apart from the pseudo-scientific basis of Naturopathy, there are a number of other serious problems with Naturopathy.

### **Dubious quality of treatment**

According to Drury (1981) when one consults a Naturopath, “Considerable care is taken in compiling a personal medical history, details of lifestyle, diet, exercise and so on.” (Drury p 118) Yet the fact is that generally most Naturopaths make diagnoses after having obtained very limited information. A survey by Chryssides (2000) revealed that most Naturopaths only asked the patient their name and address and what was wrong with them, before diagnosing their problem and making recommendations as to treatment.

Much of the poor diagnostic skills of Naturopaths can be directly attributed to their general lack of training. Unlike other professionals, there are no legal requirements that Naturopaths must have studied or done any form of training in Naturopathy or any other area of health treatment! This means that anyone can claim to be a Naturopath, and commence to treat patients.

One Naturopath, Paul Perrett, who has convictions for fraud and armed robbery, obtained a Diploma of Natural Science from the School of Natural Science while doing a second term of imprisonment. Released in 1991, he began working as a Naturopath, and soon gained a rather dubious reputation. Apart from conning hundreds, at least seventeen of his patients have died. Mentioned in the NSW Parliament on several occasions, it has been revealed that, despite claiming to be a Bachelor of Surgery, Bachelor of Science, Master of Music, Doctor of Philosophy, as well as a biochemist and forensic pathologist, all of these claims are false.

### ***Vis medicatrix naturae***

A major problem with Naturopathy is in attempting to locate the vitalistic force, the *vis medicatrix naturae*! While Naturopaths often claim it is similar to the auto-immune system, there is actually no similarity. The immune

system is a visible physiological defensive process involving the lymphatic organs, vessels, and a variety of blood cells working together to attack invading organisms, and to restore a state of homeostasis. In contrast, the *vis medicatrix naturae* is an unseen, undetectable, mystical force that is claimed to restore the body's 'pure' life-force that has, in some inexplicable manner, been 'corrupted'! Not only can science not detect it, but it also transcends all known laws of physics. In addition, Naturopaths themselves are either unable, or unwilling, to show evidence of its existence.

### **Inconsistent theories and treatments**

Naturopathy lacks a system of standard treatments, so that, "no two practitioners will treat any individual patient exactly alike." (Bradley, 1999, p 42). There are also extreme differences in theoretical opinions; for instance, some Naturopaths claim that such disorders as syphilis, rabies, influenza, appendicitis, and the effectiveness of immunization are simply myths promoted by orthodox medical practitioners. Some Naturopaths tend to make rather fantastic claims, thus Michio Kushi, an advocate of Macrobiotic diets, claims that AIDS is caused by the excessive consumption of sugar and fatty foods, (Raso, 1993, p 40).

### **Naturopathic herbal products**

Many products widely promoted by Naturopaths such as Echinacea for the prevention of colds, and *Ginkgo Biloba* as a brain stimulant, have been proven to be virtually useless. As Vernon (2007) noted, half-an-hour's extra rest

produces results similar to taking Echinacea, and is much less expensive, (p 35).

Few naturopathic medicines are ever properly tested; the requirements of the Therapeutic Goods Administration Act enables them to be listed without actually having to be tested, as a result there is a degree of uncertainty as to, "whether they are effective or even safe." (Smith, 2007, p 4).

Although Naturopaths are not qualified as chemists many actively promote their own homemade concoctions of herbal medicines, and, despite the fact that most are either totally useless or, dangerous, these have become a major source of income for many Naturopaths. Jones (1987) observed, many alternative medicines can often interfere with any legitimate prescribed medicine, and some are potentially harmful, and in Britain Naturopathic "herbal medicines contaminated with belladonna have caused atropine poisoning." (p 67).

Tait *et al* (2002) reported that herbal remedies from India, Middle East, Mexico and Asia are especially dangerous. A pregnant Indian woman, admitted to hospital after experiencing seizures, was found to be suffering from severe lead poisoning. Analysis of herbal tablets she had brought with her from India revealed abnormally high levels of lead and mercury. When born, her baby experienced deafness in one ear and delayed neurological development and required seven months treatment in hospital, the results of this lead poisoning.

While such extreme examples of the harmful effects of Naturopathic medicines are unusual,

there are other more common dangers associated with Naturopathic remedies. Because Naturopathic medicines are considered to be 'traditional', that is they have been used for centuries without apparent harm, they are not required to undergo any testing. However, in recent years, with better patient reporting facilities, a great deal that evidence is emerging to show that in fact some natural medicines do have harmful side-effects; for instance, it is now known that:

- Echinacea can cause severe reactions in persons allergic to pollen
- Evening Primrose Oil can produce seizures
- *Ginkgo biloba* can cause bleeding, blood shot eyes and migraine headaches
- Colloidal Silver can cause Argyria, (turning the skin blue), and can also also interfere with vision
- Black cohosh and Reichi Mushroom can cause liver failure, (TGA, 2006, *Adverse Drug Reaction Bulletin*, 25:2) and several individuals have needed liver transplants die to the damage caused by this drug
- Glucosamine: there are two types, one made from marine products has been reported to cause allergic skin reactions, such as reddening and inflammation of the skin, a reaction similar to hives, often accompanied by a severe itching
- St John's Wort has the potential to reduce the efficacy of drugs used to treat HIV, (Grady 2000, p 15), cyclosporin, a drug used with

organ transplant patients, and also to interfere with oral contraceptives, (TGA, 2005, *Adverse Drug Reactions Bulletin* Volume 24:1)

- Garlic, Celery seed, and *Ginko biloba* can interact with warfarin, an anti-coagulant medicine. Celery can also have a diuretic effect and can interfere with the heart medication digoxin; and with thyroxine, a medicine used to treat hypothyroidism.

### **Dubious machines**

Many Naturopaths use machines and other devices, such as the Vega Mora, Chiva and Rife Machines which are claimed to be effective in treating a wide range of diseases, even cancer and AIDS. While these machines look quite impressive, they are actually useless for treating health problems.

Most of them are glorified home-made devices using cheap parts from electronic stores and resold at a huge profit (Rowe, 1998). Their main role is to impress gullible clients into parting with greater amounts of money for 'scientific tests'.

One machine claimed to be able to analyze blood samples and provide extensive details about the health of the individual, actually does nothing at all!

In one tragic case in September 1999 Naturopath Reginald Harold Fenn treated an 18 day old baby suffering from aortic stenosis (a heart defect treatable only by surgery) with herbal medicines and by placing two metal cylinders on the baby's legs, attached to a special ma-

chine. Fenn claimed this would supply energy to the child's body and cure the heart disorder. Assuring the parents that he had cured the child he convinced them to cancel an appointment for a medical examination, and tragically, the baby died soon afterwards.

Fenn was convicted of manslaughter in 2004 and sentenced to five years gaol, however the sentence was suspended due to his age and the fact that he had terminal cancer, which, despite his wondrous machine and his claimed abilities, he was unable to cure.

### **False or misleading claims**

Naturopaths frequently make false or misleading claims. They widely promoted shark cartilage products with the claim that, since sharks never get cancer these products were beneficial to treat cancer. Since it is a fact that sharks do experience cancerous growths, this claim was clearly false.

Another common claim by some Naturopaths is that certain foods form carcinogenic substances when cooked in microwave ovens, e.g. Lee, (2001). She also claims that, "Microwave ovens were originally developed by the Nazis" However, as Kruszelnicki (2006) points out, these claims are absurd, and while these critics attack the use of microwave ovens, they conveniently overlook the fact that while the sun is a natural source of microwave radiation which we are exposed to this every day, it is only harmful to those who sunbake excessively.

Naturopathy relies on many antiquated concepts that have no place in modern medicine,

yet, despite this fact, Naturopathy not only persists, but it remains popular, with some 15.7% of the population, (Donnelly *et al* 1985, pp 539 – 540). There appear to be a number of factors responsible for this popularity:

- A general disaffection with modern medicine, which is often seen as being elitist and impersonal
- A general rejection of technology orientated scientific medicine and a return to what are perceived as simpler, safer, traditional alternatives
- The general gullibility of the public and "a general fascination with the occult and paranormal" (Donnelly *et al*, p 540).

While a 'natural' approach to health is an admirable objective, what is generally overlooked is that many of the 'natural' techniques are not unique to Naturopathy, most medical practitioners also favour a balanced approach to health-care, and emphasize the importance of such things as exercise, and healthy diets; however, unlike Naturopaths, they also include proper medication.

Essentially:

- Naturopathy is a form of religious belief, and, as such its treatments are based upon pseudo-religious faith
- Naturopathy is unable to demonstrate the *vis medicatrix naturae*, or that any other form of vital energies exist, let alone find them in the body
- Naturopathic medicines and treatments are based upon the subjective faith and belief of individuals, and so, cannot be verified

- Naturopathy comprises a myriad of concepts and hundreds of often conflicting theories and treatments.

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