STATE OF NEBRASKA

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

KAY A. ORR
GOVERNOR

GREGG F. WRIGHT, M.D., M.ED.
DIRECTOR

MEMORANDUM

TO: Senator Don Wesely
Chairman, Health & Human Services Committee

FROM: Gregg F. Wright, M.D., M.Ed.
Director of Health

DATE: February 28, 1989

SUBJECT: Recommendations on Credentialing of Naturopathic Physicians

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current proposal from the naturopathic physicians of Nebraska represented their second attempt to gain licensure for all practitioners who satisfy the standards set forth in the proposal. Their first proposal for licensure was submitted in 1986. The reviews of these two proposals generated considerable evidence on the treatment regimens and medicinal substances of the field of naturopathy. The technical committee recommended against approval of the proposal as written, but did recommend that a mechanism be found to incorporate naturopathic physicians into the health care system of Nebraska. The Board of Health recommended against approval of the proposal. The Board rejected the technical committee's proposals for alternative mechanisms to incorporate naturopaths into the health care system of Nebraska. The Department of Health recommends against approval of the proposal. The Department also recommends against the inclusion of naturopathic physicians as medical care practitioners into the health care system of Nebraska.

DISCUSSION

Does the current situation pose a potential harm to Nebraskans?

My review of the evidence from the review process leads me to conclude that there is at least some potential for harm inherent in the fact that some Nebraskans have not been able to get their health care needs met within the framework of the current health care system of our state, and in the fact that when these Nebraskans turn to alternative health care providers for medical care, there is no system of credentialing to protect them from unqualified practitioners. The potential for harm inherent in situations where there are no standards of care or regulatory mechanisms to enforce standards is illustrated by the Laetrile episode of a decade ago.

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Would licensing naturopathic physicians safely ameliorate this harm?

I do not believe that the licensure of naturopathic physicians would be either a safe or effective means of addressing the problem with Nebraska's health care system identified in the proposal. There is no convincing evidence that naturopathic medicines and treatments are effective. There is also no convincing evidence that naturopathic medicines and treatment modalities can be administered safely.

Testimony presented at the technical committee's public hearing revealed that few, if any, of the substances used by naturopaths as remedies have been subjected to chemical analysis by the FDA. Since no one knows the exact chemical composition of these substances, there is as yet no way to assess their safety and effectiveness. To grant licensure to the profession in question would be both premature, and I believe irresponsible, given the lack of scientific evidence as to the safety and effectiveness of its medicines and modalities. Licensing the members of this profession would create significant new potential for harm to the public.

Is there harm inherent in naturopathic care?

Information on the attitude of some naturopathic physicians on such topics as immunization and the treatment of infections presented to the technical committee during the review process has heightened my concerns about naturopathic care. The technical committee was informed that some naturopathic physicians advise their patients not to immunize their children. The committee was also informed that some naturopathic physicians see no benefit to antibiotics in the treatment of some types of infections. Although not all naturopaths endorse these viewpoints, the fact that some naturopaths do is reason for concern about the public health and welfare if naturopaths would ever be licensed in Nebraska. Licensing naturopathic physicians would have the effect of legitimizing all of the practices of all naturopaths who could meet the terms of the proposal.

As I reviewed the evidence and testimony presented, it became clear that there is no widespread agreement over standards of practice in the field of naturopathic medicine. It seems that each practitioner develops his or her own unique treatment regimens, and that substances and modalities that are used to treat a given malady by one naturopath, would not necessarily be used by another naturopath to treat the same malady. This absence of standards of practice in naturopathy makes a meaningful evaluation of the efficacy of naturopathic remedies impossible to conduct. This situation would also make it difficult to apply the basic criteria of discipline and enforcement to this profession, since there are no standards by which the conduct of individual practitioners could be judged. In such a situation

it would be hard to bring an action to halt a practitioner from doing something that was not effective, or even harmful, and each such action would be expensive and time-consuming. Corroboration for this concern comes from the experience that regulators in the province of Ontario in Canada have had with naturopathy. In announcing that naturopathy would no longer be regulated under a new regulatory system being established in this province, the Ontario Ministry of Health stated:

> ...the philosophy of natural healing on which naturopathy is based makes it virtually impossible to define standards of practice by which members of the profession will consider themselves bound. For this reason, regulation of naturopathy is unlikely to confer any significant degree of public protection.*

There would be great potential for harm to the public health inherent in such a situation.

There is also a potential for harm to the public inherent in the relative lack of training that most naturopaths receive in the treatment of trauma patients. This is a matter of no small concern, given that he applicant group seeks licensure for naturopaths so that they can legally function as primary care providers. All primary care providers should be well-versed in the handling of all types of emergency cases, including trauma cases. Primary care providers who lack these skills jeopardize the well-being of their patients due to the fact that a delay in treatment will result when the trauma patient must be referred to another physician.

Finally, the fragmentation involved in developing two parallel systems of primary care poses similar dangers in other situations. A dual system requires that a person have some idea of the appropriate therapy for his or her symptoms in order to decide which system to enter. Even if referrals are made, delays in diagnosis can be dangerous. There is much value to a medical philosophy that considers the whole person (and whole family) and which stresses the body's natural defenses. However, this should be integrated into the rest of medical care so that the patient has the benefit of all therapeutic modalities.

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*Striking a New Balance: A Blueprint for the Regulation of Ontario's Health Professions, page 10.

Are there any benefits to naturopathic care, and if so, are they sufficient to justify licensure?

My review of the information generated during the review process indicates that there might be some benefit to certain aspects of naturopathic care. The public hearing revealed that some people believe that their health care needs have been addressed more successfully by naturopathic care than by traditional medical care, and that some people perceive that naturopathic physicians are more willing to spend time with their patients than are medical doctors. I acknowledge that naturopathic physicians often have more time to devote to their patients than do medical doctors, and that because of this they may often be more proficient at building rapport with their patients than are medical doctors. However, these are gross generalizations that simply do not apply to many naturopathic or medical physicians. There is no reason why medical doctors cannot improve their skills in this area.

I also recognize that there is some potential for benefit in naturopathy's emphasis on reinforcing the body's natural defense mechanisms as a means of disease prevention. I might add that naturopaths are not the only medical practitioners who see merit in naturalistic, noninvasive types of care. Medical doctors have become aware of the merit of such approaches to care as is revealed by their commitment to the concept of "wellness."

However, these benefits of naturopathic care do not provide sufficient justification for licensing the profession in question. Our awareness of these benefits must not cause us to overlook the potential for harm that licensing naturopaths would create.

Can naturopathic philosophies be integrated into our current system of medical care?

This is already happening. Primary care training programs are increasingly focusing on the needs of the whole patient, and stressing medical interventions that address the patient's own strengths. This trend should continue. The strength of concern demonstrated on the part of Nebraskans for the shortcomings of traditional medicine should be noted by every physician, and especially by our medical educators. Medicine is not the technical application of drugs to an illness but the care and treatment of a person. Training programs at both medical schools in Nebraska have recognized this and include a focus on prevention and wellness and on treating the whole person. But more can be done, and this review process emphasizes that need.

Should the public be given the freedom to choose the services of non-traditional medical doctors regardless of the implications of this choice for public health and welfare?

During the review of this proposal, some persons have argued that the public has the right to have freedom of choice in the selection of a medical practitioner, and that there are limits as to how far the state should go to protect citizens from harm. The state has a responsibility to protect the public from harm from unqualified health care practitioners and health care practices. I do not believe that the state of Nebraska should credential naturopathic physicians and thereby grant to the members of the public complete freedom to choose these practitioners as primary care providers. I do not believe that either the training or the type of care offered by this profession is sufficient to either provide benefits to the public health and welfare or to protect the public health and welfare from harm.

Can anything be done to address the concerns of those who want naturopathic medicine?

I believe that there is a need to do extensive scientific research in the area of natural medicines in order to gather reliable information on the efficacy of the substances used by naturopathic physicians to treat their patients. Until this type of evidence is available, it is difficult to evaluate the claims of the naturopaths that their medicines are safe and effective.

The technical committee also saw that there was a need for more information in this area. The committee members decided to address this concern by recommending that the Legislature explore various mechanisms other than the proposal by which naturopaths could be allowed to practice medicine in Nebraska for a limited period of time. As I understand it, their recommendation was made in order to find some means by which evidence on the efficacy of naturopathic remedies could be evaluated.

One alternative mechanism by which naturopaths would be allowed to practice would be one in which naturopaths would practice as physician extenders. This mechanism would allow naturopaths to engage in their full scope of practice under the supervision of a medical doctor. This concept has been applied to naturopathic physicians by the state of Colorado. This model would fulfill the requirements set forth by the technical committee and would create a role for naturopaths that would allow them to function fully within the existing health care system.

This would enhance the legitimacy of their practice and would allow them an opportunity to build bridges to the medical community as well.

Although I respect the committee members' intentions, and admire their diligence and creativity, I disagree with their approach on this matter of mutual concern. To grant naturopathic physicians the right to practice medicine in Nebraska without supervision as a means of gathering evidence on their profession, even if it were for a short time, would be to create great potential for harm to the public health and welfare. Research must never be conducted in such a way as to jeopardize the public health and welfare.

GFW/all