

■ Does your student have what it takes to be a Naturopathic Doctor? ND Pre-Competencies and Competencies

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Undergraduate students in premed programs have many paths from which to choose, one of which is the path of the naturopathic physician. This career path in primary care medicine offers many benefits, including the abilities to develop relationships with patients and to help patients prevent and cure illness and disease. Naturopathic medicine is a growing trend in health care, with visits to naturopathic doctors (NDs) increasing by 46 percent between 2002 and 2007¹. Naturopathic doctors receive highly specialized training at one of seven accredited four-year professional medical colleges across North America. Educated in the same biomedical sciences and diagnostic skills as MDs, NDs focus on prevention and natural healing through nutrition, homeopathy and other methodologies that are minimally invasive and have low toxicity.

The career path of a naturopathic physician offers extraordinary benefits, and thus requires a process of rigorous preparation and study. Accordingly, the naturopathic medical profession has developed specific means of measuring student preparedness for entry into the field of naturopathic medicine. The evaluation begins with a review of ND pre-competencies, and extends throughout the student life cycle,

methodically examining admission, academic and post-graduate competencies as well.

ND Pre-competencies

What does it take to become an ND? Students currently enrolled in a premed program do not yet possess many of the competencies they will need in order to become a naturopathic physician. Even so, health professions advisors can look for a number of *pre-competencies* that potential naturopathic doctors need in order to be well suited for the ND profession. These pre-competencies are precursors to the competencies students will develop in medical school. Students destined to become NDs probably will feel more than simple agreement with the concepts; the ideas likely will strike a chord with future naturopathic doctors.

Premed students need to exhibit:

- The capacity to critically evaluate the current medical paradigm,
- A comfort level with an approach to medicine that is “outside the box,”
- Understanding of the human body’s ability to maintain and restore its own health,
- Resonance with the role of physician as teacher/counselor,
- The capacity to be an effective communicator with

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- excellent listening skills and high levels of patience and empathy,
- The ability to engage patients as active partners in their own health care,
- The ability to embrace the confluence of both evidence-based processes and traditional healing methods,
- The ability to envision interacting with a variety of health care providers, integrating allopathic and naturopathic approaches,
- The capacity for understanding medical consequences of environmental and societal issues,
- The ability to envision working with all ethnic, social, cultural and gender groups,
- The ability to envision running a small business, if headed toward private practice, (Approximately 37 percent of newly graduated NDs, and 47 percent of seasoned practitioners, opt to practice privately)
- The ability to envision promoting and marketing naturopathic or integrative practices (through public speaking, writing, etc.)

These pre-competencies are based on standards set forth by the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education (CNME) and the Professional Competency Profile developed by the Council of Chief Academic and Clinical Officers (CCACO), both discussed later in this article.

Admission Competencies

What competencies do students need in order to qualify for admission to naturopathic medical school? Admission to an ND school requires a bachelor's degree — with a science major preferred — and a demonstrated record of academic success. The average grade point average of students admitted to most ND schools falls between 3.1 and 3.3. Successful applicants are expected to have a GPA of 3.0 or higher for priority admission.

In addition to standard GPA requirements and traditional application procedures (personal essays, letters of reference, transcripts, etc.), naturopathic medical school admissions officers use a cadre of techniques to determine qualification for the naturopathic medical profession, including:

- in depth personal interviews,
- critical thinking exercises,
- simulation scenarios to evaluate emotional intelligence,

- completion of additional prerequisite coursework in the basic sciences
- personal familiarity with natural medicine, and
- shadowing, mentorship and volunteer experience.

These admissions standards have been validated through years of experience.

Academic Competencies

The NPLEX is taken in two parts. Students take Part I Basic Sciences after their second year of naturopathic medical school. Most schools require students to take the exam prior to admission into the clinical clerkships portion of their education in the third year. Then, following graduation, students take the NPLEX Part II Clinical Sciences. Passage of the exam is required in order to qualify for state or province licensure.

The North American Board of Naturopathic Examiners (NABNE) administers the NPLEX to students and graduates of accredited naturopathic medical schools. While the competencies measured by NPLEX are proprietary, they are very closely aligned with the competencies of the ND schools themselves. In addition, students' knowledge and skills are measured by a number of other tests and evaluation procedures throughout their educations, including:

- course tests,
- individual and group readiness assessment tests,
- reflection papers,
- course surveys,
- clinical clerkships,
- clinical milestone exams,
- objective structured clinical exams (OSCEs),
- electronic portfolios, and
- class presentations.

Post-graduate Competencies

What serves as the chief indicator of a graduate's competency and preparedness to enter the profession? Professional competency can be measured, analyzed and evaluated at multiple junctures along the career path of a practicing doctor. Several of these post-graduate competencies presently are being measured:

- **The aforementioned NPLEX Part II Clinical Sciences** objectively measures student pass rate. Schools must maintain a minimum of a 70 percent

pass rate for first-time takers on the NPLEX in order to retain their accreditation.

- **Post-graduate residency** evaluations and completion rates gauge student preparedness in a real-world practice setting. Although most states and provinces that license NDs do not require completion of a residency, new ND graduates frequently elect to participate in residencies or to shadow an experienced ND. A number of established naturopathic residency opportunities across the country provide new graduates with rigorous, advanced clinical training that meets the stringent requirements set forth by the industry's regulating body, the CNME, discussed further below.
- The Naturopathic Post-Graduate Association (NPGA) is a new organization dedicated to maintaining exemplary naturopathic post-graduate medical education. In November 2010, the NPGA implemented the profession's first universal application process for CNME-approved residency programs. The process includes a match program that was successfully completed in April 2011. This organization will be a leader in collecting and analyzing residency data and best practices for the improvement of naturopathic residencies throughout the world.
- Continuing medical education (CME) is another indicator of ongoing professional development and workforce preparedness. Following graduation, state licensing boards require and monitor CME on an annual basis.

Deans from all seven naturopathic medical colleges are charged by the AANMC to convene regularly as the Council of Chief Academic and Clinical Officers (CCACO). CCACO members believe that all schools improve when they share knowledge, and as a result, they have developed a Naturopathic Medical Colleges Professional Competency Profile.

Outcomes Guide Programmatic Revisions

In order to help students achieve the academic and post-graduate competencies outlined above, all schools currently are revising their curricula based on the findings of their academic assessment programs and outcomes measurement.

Several naturopathic medical schools are making a curricular shift toward a body system-based learn-

ing model. Modeled after the way a physician actually practices, the systems approach is an academic trend in many fields of medical education, and is expected to develop better doctors in practice.

Many ND schools have begun or will soon introduce clinical training during the first year, rather than the third. This training includes the use of standardized patient models, in which trained "patients" present symptoms in a consistent manner. Standardized patient models allow students to hone their clinical skills in consistent, measurable ways. Students who have received this early clinical exposure already are demonstrating higher levels of confidence and competence. They are able to hit the ground running with a high level of comfort and familiarity when they reach their clinical clerkships later in medical school.

Another new aspect of first-year clinical training is a formal field observation program that directs students to look for and journal about specific aspects of patient care as they observe practicing NDs. In some instances, the addition of these clinical hours has led to a reduction in the percentage of classroom seat hours, in favor of an increase in patient care hours.

Finally, many of the ND schools have developed partnerships with local medical schools and/or health science universities to enhance the integrative clinical training experience for ND, MD and other medical students.

The CNME Drives High Standards

Why all the changes? The Council on Naturopathic Medical Education (CNME) is the driving force. CNME is the national accrediting agency for all ND degree programs in North America. True to its mission of quality assurance, CNME recently issued a new standard on academic program assessment: All CNME-accredited ND programs now are required to make regular use of the information generated through their evaluation and assessment processes to update and improve their programs.

By all accounts, CNME's certification process is rigorous. Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education recognized CNME for the maximum five-year renewal of recognition with no adverse findings.

CNME-accredited ND programs provide all the biomedical courses that an allopathic medical school

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provides, plus the naturopathic medicine courses that concentrate on whole-patient wellness and seek out the underlying cause of illness. All seven accredited ND schools have CNME-approved research programs on campus. While non-accredited ND programs do exist, CNME's grant of accreditation to a program indicates to prospective students and the public that they may have confidence in the program's educational quality, and in the competency of its graduates.

Only those students and graduates of programs that are accredited or pre-accredited (in candidacy status) by the CNME are eligible to sit for the NPLEX, and upon passing the exam are eligible for state and provincial licensure in the United States and Canada, respectively.

The Colleges

There are seven nationally accredited naturopathic medical schools in North America.

They include Bastyr University, Seattle, Wash.; National College of Natural Medicine (NCCNM), Portland,

Ore.; National University of Health Sciences (NUHS), Chicago, Ill.; Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine & Health Sciences (SCNM), Phoenix, Ariz.; and University of Bridgeport College of Naturopathic Medicine (UBCNM), Bridgeport, CT along with Boucher Institute of Naturopathic Medicine (BINM), Vancouver, British Columbia; and Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine (CCNM), Toronto, Ontario.

The Association of Accredited Naturopathic Medical Colleges (AANMC) supports the coordinated efforts of these seven schools.

Conclusion

The efforts outlined above have been implemented with the singular purpose of ensuring that naturopathic medical students develop the competencies they need to successfully practice naturopathic medicine.

References

- 1 "Job Outlook for NDs," AANMC website (August 4, 2010).

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