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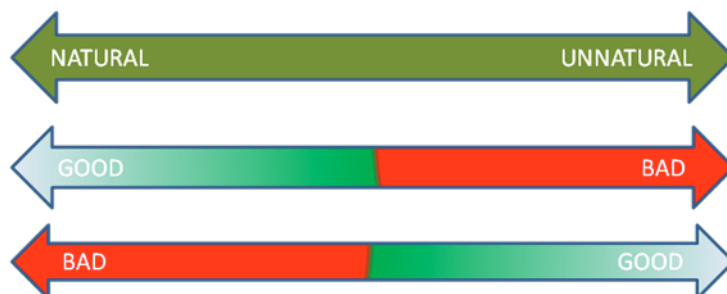
What is Natural?

There is an innate comfort in the expression 'Natural'. It implies minimal disruption, a position of relaxed evolutionary adaptation, a sense of order, a kind or safe strategy, perhaps a pleasant or mildly inconvenient act or intervention. It engenders a reduction of attentiveness as if the natural order is responsible for itself and therefore can be left alone – to manage its own outcome.

Unnatural on the other hand conveys an almost immediate disquiet, strangeness, a drift from that of the normal order of life and therefore an act of perturbation and severe disruption and therefore is a state to be avoided. If this approach is applied it suggests attentiveness, a position in which the act or state of being requires careful monitoring and cannot be allowed to operate independently.

Yet as all practitioners learn there are almost no events, no human presentations that are so linear in their appearance or outcome. Mostly they are a mix of occurrences for which a variety of interventions regarded by some as 'natural' and others as unnatural are required to assist the patient to return to their optimal state of homeodynamics.

I do not use the term homeostasis at this point as stasis implies rigidity and the mechanisms utilised by our body to achieve equilibrium, a state of 'natural' balance, if we are to employ the use of the word are not static. The only time we see stasis – represented by a flat line on an EKG machine - is when we are dead. Life is dynamic and so the term homeodynamic reflects more accurately the activity we constantly employ to achieve a state of optimal wellness.



The act of differentiating between natural and unnatural has also brought into play the notion that one is good and the other bad. A dichotomy has developed, reflecting philosophy rather than reality. There are grades of value to be extracted from both sides and to attempt to utilise 'natural' as a tool, a weapon of defence or attack, a cluster bomb of disquiet lobbed into current arguments will ensure its demise as a word of relevance. The result will be an extension of the current use of 'natural' in an exceedingly ambiguous and imprecise manner.

We have a responsibility to nurture nature, both in terms of a linguistic need and in terms of a societal need, yet where do we begin?

The aim of all definitions is to be concise, to present a fundamental truth, allowing all to accept the definition is sound and substantive. Yet the nature of 'natural' is that its definition is instinctively simple yet descriptively complex. This inherent complexity together with our collective simplicity of

comprehension means that its value as a definitive explanatory term of a style or type of medicine is prone to easy critique.

As a practitioner employing the clinical use of foods, food concentrates and bacterial compositions I am aware of the need for clarification.

I see 'natural' as referring to an absence of chemical modification to distinguish natural products from all other sources of chemical diversity. Nature it seems is able to optimise certain compounds through many millennia of evolution, and it is this collective wisdom found in the process of evolution of which parts will have been shaped by unnatural events that defines 'natural' to me.

We are surrounded by species diversity, our cousins - bacteria for example have existed on earth for over 3 billion years yet just 1-5% have been cultured. Relatively few species of bacteria are actually pathogenic to humans, despite this Koch's germ theory of disease has dominated pharmaceutical and to some extent traditional medicine for the last 100 years. It remains a corner stone of the skeptic's antagonism who seek to diminish forms of medicine that reflect what we regard as more natural strategies. Yet it fails to explain many of our more complex co morbid conditions that present to the typical practitioner.

Today with the complex mapping of the human microbiome, it is clear that the vast majority of bacteria are at least benign, but mostly active in the process of homeodynamics. Surely the germ theory will need to evolve to recognise this 'natural' order – a ratio between pathogen and commensal so that the balance – the 'natural' order is seen as the place of health and that an absence of commensals may be equally as important as the presence of pathogen.

Combinational chemistry practised by nature is much more sophisticated than that which is produced in the laboratory providing a treasure chest of potential range of 'natural' products estimated to be in the region of 500,000.ⁱ By 2001 just 160,000 have been identifiedⁱⁱ and are growing at a rate of 10,000 per year.ⁱⁱⁱ

Antibiotics often seen as unnatural may actually be described as natural: low molecular weight organic natural products (secondary metabolites, or idiolites (peculiar metabolite)) made by microorganisms. It is their overuse – an estimated 35million pounds are produced in the USA each year of which at least 50% are used in animals, making them a societal drug with impacts far beyond their immediate primary target that define them as problematic.

Naturopathic ideology focuses on naturally-occurring and minimally-invasive methods, trusting to the "healing power of nature". Naturopaths recognise that the response engendered by the organism to the challenge may actually confer a secondary benefit, and modern science is also recognising this interaction. Allergy and cancer appear for example to have an inverse relationship. For over 50 years there have been hints that allergy sufferers may have less incidences of cancer, but evidence was always contradictory. Yet a recent analysis reveals that allergy sufferers do have a level

of protection against cancer of tissues that are exposed to the external environment^{iv} – is this natural?

The IgE system and its associated allergy symptoms may serve a common protective function: the rapid expulsion of pathogens, dangerous natural toxins, and other carcinogenic antigens before they can trigger malignant neoplasia in exposed tissues.

As a last thought:

It remains of some delight to me that the world's most famous scientific and medical journal retains its eponymous title: - Nature. Founded in 1869.

ⁱ Mendelson R, Balick MJ. The value of undiscovered pharmaceuticals in tropical forests. *Econ Bot* 1995;49:223-228

ⁱⁱ Dictionary of Natural Products; London: Chapman and Hall/CRC Press, 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ Henkel T, Brunne RM, Muller H, Reichel F. Statistical Investigation into the structural complementarity of natural products and synthetic compounds. *Agnew Chem Int Ed Engl* 1999; 38:643-647

^{iv} Sherman PW, Holland E, Sherman JS Allergies: their role in cancer prevention. *Q Rev Biol*, Dec 2008; 83(4): 339-62. [View Abstract](#)