

Naturopathy vs Allopathic Medicine: perspectives from a campaigner for natural health

By Robert Verkerk BSc MSc DIC PhD FRSM

Founder and executive director, Alliance for Natural Health International

www.anhinternational.org and www.anh-europe.org

You can compare naturopathy with allopathic medicine in a host of different ways. For example, what are their most seminal differences, how long has each approach been around, how widely have they each been adopted in different cultures, or what have been their respective pros and cons. But like so many things, your views are framed largely by your perspective, experience and innate biases. Let's not waste our time with facts that are easily accessible, but it may be worth highlighting some of the contrasts, as seen from my own perspective. In my view, here are some of the most pronounced contrasts:

Naturopathy	Allopathy
Aims to treat the cause of disease by promoting self-healing within the body	Aims to treat symptoms of disease, often pharmacologically or surgically
Utilises whole body approach and focuses on interactions between body systems	Views body as a machine driven by genetic, molecular and biochemical processes, all of which can be interfered with to treat disease
Recognises bioenergetic (vitality) forces within the body	Does not generally recognise bioenergetic forces within the body
Diet, lifestyle and environment are seen as being of seminal importance to manifestation of disease and are adjusted, as appropriate, accordingly	Environment of patient, including diet and lifestyle, are regarded as relatively unimportant in treatment protocols unless very obviously disruptive (e.g. smoking)
Uses multiple modalities simultaneously, emphasising approaches that are compatible with biological function	Generally reliant on a single, unilateral modality, especially new-to-nature drugs
Longer face-to-face consultations with naturopathic physicians (≥ 30 min)	Shorter face-to-face consultations with allopathic physicians (≤ 10 min)
Places primary responsibility on the individual to maintain health and wellbeing	Primary responsibility for healthcare is placed on the primary physician and medical establishment

Allopathy didn't really become dominant until after the post-WWII boom in organic chemistry that saw extremely rapid growth of the chemical and pharmaceutical industries. The new chemistry brought with it a new business model: one reliant on patents. But to get a patent you needed to do something nature hadn't; you had to be able to justify your inventiveness, a key feature of any patent. This phase of inventiveness in organic chemistry — one that has ebbed considerably today as the 'ideas pool' becomes depleted — has left its mark on our land, water, atmosphere and bodies. A sophisticated biosphere, that has coevolved with other elements and

organisms on a planet free of such chemistries for so long, has been unable to wear the abuse wrought by these new chemistries. Iatrogenic errors, for example, now the third or fourth leading cause of death in the west, is just one expression of this.

The plus side of new-to-nature patents for the patent holders is that they've been able to enjoy the fruits of their research to the exclusion of competitors during the period that the new chemical remains under patent. But the down side to the business model is manufacturers have needed to keep developing new chemistries to keep their balloon in the air. The environment and human bodies of course have been innocent victims along the way.

I have long felt that spending a lot of time and energy in an attempt to force allopathic practitioners to wake up to the merits of naturopathic approaches, or vice versa, is counter productive. The belief systems and knowledge bases of each group, along with those areas that are thought by each side to be unknown or unknowable, means that most attempts to alter the perspective of the other group just serves to further entrench each view. Some of those in the alternative medicine camp sometimes have difficulty acknowledging that many of their efforts to expose the failures of allopathy may serve to help manifest the very things they don't want.

In that vein, I'd like to propose three things that I'm engaged in with my work at the Alliance for Natural Health (www.anh-europe.org) that aims to make a difference.

These are as follows:

1. Developing new, objective and largely quantitative methodologies to evaluate clinical experience.
2. To help encourage acceptance of sustainability concepts into healthcare decision-making.
3. To bring clear miscarriages of justice by governments to the courts for independent review.

Let me expand on each briefly.

New scientific methods for evaluating clinical experience

Professor Edzard Ernst has made it his business to use the randomised controlled trial as the gold standard for measuring the effectiveness of alternative medicine. But there are severe limitations associated with the method, many of the most important being revealed in an exposée of Ernst that I wrote back in 2007.¹ Interestingly, although there is common belief, added to by a pro-Ernst mainstream media, Ernst himself admits that some 53% of his own published studies point to positive effects of CAM therapies.² This could be crudely compared to just 12% of orthodox treatments being regarded as beneficial in the most recent version of the

¹ http://www.anh-europe.org/files/071115-Edzard-Ernst-exposee_final.pdf

² <http://www.anh-europe.org/news/the-apparent-turn-around-of-professor-ernst>

now defunct evaluation of 2500 conventional medical treatments by *BMJ Clinical Evidence*.² The key problem is that Ernst has been focused only on elucidating a treatment effect, that he refers to as the 'specific therapeutic effect'. It is likely that by ignoring all the other interacting factors that contribute to a patient's experience, that Ernst himself recognises and refers to as the 'total effect', the treatment effects are often lost in the variance of the RCT which would tend to understate their effects as compared with reality. It is thus proposed that we should be developing better quantitative and objective methods to measure the patient's experience and therefore we should be aiming to measure effectiveness, as opposed to efficacy. Efficacy, it should be remembered is more related to the effects of treatment as recorded experimentally, while effectiveness relates more to Ernst's 'total effect', in other words, reality, as experienced by the patient. Presently we have few tools in this area and the development of these is now one of the key focuses of an international collaboration of doctors and scientists being established by the ANH. Our collaborative effort is referred to as the Alliance for Natural Health Scientific and Medical Collaboration (ANH-SMC).

Sustainability in healthcare

We are working to apply the notion of sustainability to healthcare. It's already been done in the fields of agriculture, energy, forestry, tourism and many other areas of human endeavour. It's time we did it in healthcare as allopathy is unsustainable in terms of almost any marker you choose to select. We also feel it would help us to get away from the stone throwing between the natural medicine and allopathic camps which has by and large borne few fruits and served mainly to further entrench the views of each camp. By promoting the idea to policy makers and governments, to help them select modalities in healthcare—from whatever side of the debate they might come—that meet pre-selected criteria for sustainability, more biologically compatible approaches to healthcare should be teased out.

We have defined sustainable healthcare back in 2006 as follows:

A complex system of interacting approaches to the restoration, management and optimisation of human health that have an ecological base, that are environmentally, economically and socially viable indefinitely, that work harmoniously both with the human body and the non-human environment, and which do not result in unfair or disproportionate impacts on any significant contributory element of the healthcare system.

For more information on this, please refer to a paper I wrote in 2009 in the *Journal of the Australian College of Nutritional and Environmental Medicine*.³

³ http://www.anh-europe.org/files/091001-SustainableHealthcare_ACNEM_final.pdf

Legal actions are imperative

Sitting on the sidelines when governments overstep their legal authority is not an option if we are to help protect our right to natural medicine. We have taken a series of actions both in Europe and the USA and, funds permitting, will continue to do this. We have had recent success against the FDA in preventing the erosion of health claims.⁴ We've previously taken a case on food supplements through the High Court⁵ and European Court of Justice⁶ and succeeded in getting important clarifications that have significantly improved the legal regime for vitamins and minerals, particularly those from natural sources.⁷

The ANH is working hard preparing a new case that it intends to bring to the European Courts, again via the High Court in London.⁸ This time the object is to prevent a ban on thousands of products that are neither capable of registration under the simplified registration scheme offered by the EU's Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive (THMPD) nor can they continue to be sold as food supplements. Such products effectively fall between the two regulatory 'stools' of food and medicinal law. These products include a large array of botanical products used by naturopaths. The ANH is very grateful to support from the General Naturopathic Council and the General Council and register of Naturopaths.

For more information on this, please refer to:

ANH EU Herb Challenge page: <http://www.anh-europe.org/node/3113>
FAQs on the THMPD: <http://www.anh-europe.org/news/anh-and-benefyt-clarify-confusion-about-eu-herbal-campaign>

⁴ <http://www.anh-europe.org/news/anh-press-release-court-victory-against-fda-for-free-speech>

⁵ <http://www.anh-europe.org/node/100>

⁶ http://www.anh-europe.org/files/050726-ANH_ECJ-silver-lining.pdf

⁷ <http://www.anh-europe.org/news/anh-press-release-natural-sources-of-vitamins-and-minerals-protected-from-potential-bans-0>

⁸ <http://www.anh-europe.org/news/anh-press-release-appeal-to-european-herbal-sector>