

# GUEST EDITORIAL

## TWENTY YEARS IN NATUROPATHY

*H. Ron Hobbs, ND*

I am fond of a quote from one of John Lennon's songs, in which he says that "life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." It certainly describes the past 20 years that I have been involved with naturopathic medicine.

I first heard of naturopathic medicine while I was living in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains just outside Boulder, CO, where I spent the majority of my time climbing, hiking, and skiing. A friend of mine and I were considering going to chiropractic school, but in February of 1979 he told me of a school of naturopathic medicine forming in northern California. Shortly thereafter I went with him to Monte Rio where I interviewed for and was accepted into the inaugural class of the Pacific College of Naturopathic Medicine (PCNM). That summer, instead of kayaking in Glacier Bay, I took organic chemistry to meet my final requirement for entering PCNM.

In September 1979 I joined approximately 70 other people in an old religious camp (rumor has it that it also functioned as a brothel for the nearby Bohemian Club) under the coast redwoods that fill the valley of the Russian River. There, with a faculty composed mostly of chiropractors who had been trained at Western States Chiropractic College, a couple of itinerant teachers drawn from the area, and the occasional holistic medical doctor drawn from the San Francisco Bay area, we began the arduous task of becoming physicians. The first week was particularly tough for me as I was very homesick for Colorado. I considered leaving a number of times during the first week. However, I intuited that the students with whom I shared that old wood-heated auditorium we used as a classroom were going to make a positive impact on the health of the human community. My decision to stay was without a doubt the best of my life.

Despite attracting support from the profession and the two naturopathic schools farther north and being a founding member

---

Dean, University of Bridgeport College of Naturopathic  
Medicine  
60 Lafayette St  
Bridgeport, CT 06601  
(203) 576-4112  
rhobbs@bridgeport.edu

of the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education, PCNM did not survive long enough to graduate a class. Its demise was in part due to the difficulties of opening a naturopathic clinic in an unlicensed state and in part due to its lack of qualified administrators. Despite a bold eleventh hour attempt to secure financing, PCNM closed in spring 1982. In one of those wonderful examples of the spirit of this profession, the first year students pooled their money to pay the anatomy instructor Denny Freeman, DC and the lab assistant so they could finish teaching the anatomy class. I was that lab instructor who had, until then, been paid with work study funds. I am still grateful to those students for allowing me to complete that course with them. I, in turn, joined my second/third year classmates in paying Hein Zeylstra, the director of the National Institute of Medical Herbalists in the United Kingdom at the time, who had already come to teach us herbal medicine. Though the formal college had failed, our education as naturopathic physicians would not stop.

Another example of the indefatigable spirit of naturopathic medicine was that many of the 100+ students at PCNM transferred schools and completed their naturopathic medical training. I applied for transfer to the John Bastyr College of Naturopathic Medicine (JBCNM) in Seattle, WA, was accepted, and started classes and clinic in September 1982. I chose the institution that was to become Bastyr University because of its commitment to integrating the "modern science of medicine with the ancient wisdom of healing." I was already beginning to see that naturopathic medicine was more than just chiropractic with additional training in nutrition and herbs, and it seemed clear that JBCNM would likely play an important role in the revival of this profession. In May 1984, I was a member of the third class to graduate from Bastyr. A few months later, I passed the board exams and became the 456th naturopathic doctor to be licensed in the state of Washington.

When I started naturopathic medical school, my plans were to return to Colorado after finishing my degree and set up a practice in a small town in the heart of my beloved Rocky Mountains. However, life apparently wanted nothing to do with those plans. During my last year in school I obtained a job consulting in a health food store as well as a summer job as an instructor for the Pacific Crest Outward Bound School. After graduation, I added faculty positions at Bastyr University and Antioch University (also in Seattle). During a class on guided imagery at Bastyr University, I met Dr. Charles Johnston, the Seattle-based psychiatrist who was to found the Institute for Creative Development.

I decided that I wanted to do advanced clinical training with him, and later joined the Institute's founding board.

Since it was clear that I would be in Seattle for some time, I opened a practice in the Lake City neighborhood of north Seattle. I envisioned becoming a part-time doctor and part-time educator. Again life had other ideas. I had opened my practice in the same office as Dr. Peggy Smith, who was then the Dean of Admissions for Bastyr University. While planning a trip back East to see my parents, I asked Dr. Smith if there was anything I could do for Bastyr University while I was there. She replied, "Why don't you do a recruiting trip?" Though I had no idea what that really meant, I agreed. Just before Christmas 1984, I stuffed some brochures in my suitcase and embarked on a cross country train trip to spread the word of naturopathy.

I must have done a good job. In April 1985, Dr. Smith hired me as her assistant, primarily to do recruiting. I applied for her job after she left the Admissions Office. In January 1988, I became the first full-time Director of Admissions for what was then known as John Bastyr College, succeeding Dr. Bill Mitchell and, of course, Dr. Smith.

During my time in the admissions office at Bastyr University, I witnessed a sea change in the public awareness about naturopathic medicine. On my first few recruiting trips in the mid 1980s, I struggled to explain the basic concepts of the medicine; by the 1990s many more people understood that we had something to do with alternative medicine, herbs or nutrition. Of course, many still don't understand the fact that we are an independent profession. Surprisingly, there are people within blocks of Bastyr University who still don't know it exists. When I first attended a national meeting of pre-health professions advisors from undergraduate institutions, few were interested in hearing about naturopathic medicine. In 1996, I was asked to present an update on the profession to the national meeting of this same group. Best of all, some of the advisors bragged to me how one or more of their

students had been admitted to Bastyr University. I am forever grateful for the opportunity I have had to interact with so many of the incredible human beings who are attracted to this profession as their life's work.

By early 1998, it had become clear to me that my time in admissions had come to an end. Nationally, the average time that an admissions officer stays in a job is seven years. In a seemingly innocent conversation with a student at the University of Bridgeport College of Naturopathic Medicine (UBCNM), I realized that it was wonderfully positioned to bring the academic enterprise of naturopathic medicine back to the Atlantic coast of North America, its ancestral home. The first school of naturopathy was, after all, in New York City. UBCNM's first dean, Dr. Jim Sensenig, had just left, and I believed that the school needed new leadership in order to survive. I applied for the job in September 1998 and was appointed as the dean of the newest college of naturopathic medicine in the United States.

If someone, even 10 years ago, had told me that this would happen, I would not have believed them. I have certainly gained a new respect for what Dr. Joe Pizzorno, Ms. Sheila Quinn, Dr. Bill Mitchell and others accomplished 21 years ago with the founding of Bastyr University, and what Dr. John Bastyr and his colleagues accomplished 45 years ago with the founding of National College of Naturopathic Medicine.

UBCNM received a license from the state of Connecticut in 1996, and the first students entered the program in the fall of 1997. It is the first naturopathic medical school to be housed in a comprehensive university, and is associated with the only university-based college of chiropractic and the oldest dental hygiene program in the US. The school has had its share of challenges, some comparable to those faced by other schools and some unique to this school. However, there are now 40 students enrolled and we expect that number to double next fall. I envision UBCNM will become a regional academic natural health center.

When I look back on the 20 years I have been involved with the profession of naturopathic medicine, I am amazed at what has been accomplished. I can't help thinking about what the next 20 years will be like. It seems certain that we will be licensed in more states. There will certainly be more schools, although I believe that most of them will have to be started within existing institutions. It is interesting to note that the osteopathic medical profession had only five schools in the mid 1970s; within the past 20 years that number has grown to 19. I expect that our profession will likely experience a similar growth in the next 20 years.

Despite all our plans and predictions, we must remember that life bats last. Plans will go awry and all manner of unforeseen events will occur. Regardless of what happens over the next 20 years, I firmly believe that Dr. Bastyr was right when he long ago told a group of students that there "is a truth in this medicine" that is stronger than its specific form, or any of its misfortunes. I think naturopathic medicine has its own vital force, which moves "in mysterious ways." My life in this profession has brought me to such unexpected and wonderful places in the last 20 years. It will, no doubt, take us all to unexpected places in the next twenty.

**Editor's Note:** Just before publication, Dr. Hobbs' position as dean of the UBCNM ended. He could not be reached for comment.