

Briefing Note

Assembly of First Nations (AFN)

February 3rd, 2025

Attention: Jenny Gardipy, Senior Policy Analyst

Re: Resolution no. 97/2023

Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) Coverage for Naturopathic Medicine

Background:

Per resolution 97/2023 the First Nations-in-Assembly directed AFN to, in part, advocate for the Government of Canada to amend the NIHB to include coverage for services provided by naturopathic doctors and to engage in dialogue with relevant government authorities to include naturopathic services within the publicly funded healthcare system.

Analysis:

Although many Indigenous Peoples across Canada access health care from Naturopathic Doctors (NDs), very little research has been conducted on the experiences of Indigenous Peoples with naturopathic medicine.^{1,2}

Naturopathic medicine (or Naturopathy), a distinct system of medicine that blends traditional healing knowledge and practices with modern scientific principles and research^{3,4} is recognized by the World Health Organization and is being practised in 98 countries worldwide.^{5,6} NDs are highly educated, regulated primary health care providers who recognize the importance of body, mind, and spirit as key aspects of health and the importance of time in nature, engagement with family and community, plant medicines, nutritious food, regular physical movement and connection to spirit as key strategies to maintain wellness.^{3,4} These philosophies articulated by the naturopathic profession bear key similarities to diverse Indigenous views of health and healing; including but not limited to whole-person care that values integration of body, mind and spirit.^{1,2,7} Indigenous models of health are holistic and are therefore quite disparate from Western biomedical concepts of health which tend to focus on disease and infirmity.⁸ Due to their training in western biomedical science, their focus on holistic health and their depth of knowledge regarding plant medicines, NDs may be useful in

helping bridge the gap between the biomedical model and traditional Indigenous healing methods and practices.^{1,2,9}

Deninu Kue First Nation ND, Dr. Nicole Redvers points out that naturopathic medical schools are some of the institutions responding to the increasing dissatisfaction that many people in North America have with the Western biomedical model and its focus on patient-in, prescription-written, patient-out, person-to-person interactions that happen in fifteen minutes or less.¹⁰ This dissatisfaction is a theme emerging in Dr. Jessica Carfagnini ND's Master's thesis research "Investigating the experiences of Indigenous patients accessing naturopathic medicine in Thunder Bay Ontario".¹¹ Participants in this research clearly articulate how much they have gained from naturopathic health care, including relief from acute back pain, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and menopausal symptoms without the side effects that many had experiences from pharmaceutical interventions.¹¹ Indigenous patients describe naturopathic care as easy to access, holistic, empowering and inclusive of a variety of non-pharmaceutical treatment options.¹¹ They describe NDs as knowledgeable, trustworthy health care providers (HCP) who create a safe space, offer patient-centered care and collaborate with MDs and other allied HCPs.¹¹ Naturopathic medicine was seen as synergistic with the traditional plant medicines used by relatives in their communities, and as an effective way to stay healthy and prevent disease.¹¹ When asked about barriers to access, participants highlighted the fact that naturopathic care is only accessible via extended health care benefits.¹¹ Participants stressed the need for naturopathic medicine to be more available to people in their communities with diabetes, chronic pain and/or mental health challenges.¹¹

ND are trained to complete comprehensive health histories with each patient, perform physical exams, order lab tests, diagnose and treat using modalities such as lifestyle counselling, clinical nutrition interventions and botanical medicine.^{3,4,12} NDs also receive four years of in-depth training with a focus on a holistic understanding of health and uses plant and animal medicines, which is an approach that makes sense to many First Nations Peoples in Canada.^{13,14,15} Naturopathic medicine also employs acupuncture and herbal remedies, as well as diet and exercise recommendations which many First Nations Peoples have found to be helpful with chronic pain and other complex health challenges.^{13,15,16} In terms of filling gaps in healthcare, NDs have played an important role in certain rural and northern Ontario communities^{9,17} and across the globe.^{5,6,18} In particular, naturopathic medicine has a long and successful history of supporting patients with chronic health conditions, as well as helping others prevent chronic disease.^{5,19,20} Evidence suggests that health policymakers and researchers across the globe should consider the benefits and potential contributions of naturopathic care, especially when prevention-focused, low-cost interventions are needed.^{5,6}

Recommendation:

Naturopathic care should be included as part of the healthcare framework provided to Indigenous Peoples through the NIHB and additionally included more broadly in the publicly funded healthcare landscape in Canada.

About the CAND:

The Canadian Association of Naturopathic Doctors (CAND) is the national professional association representing over 2,500 naturopathic doctors (NDs). Our members are highly trained healthcare professionals. They pursued an undergraduate degree before entering a four-year, full-time, naturopathic medical program accredited by the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education and have passed an entry-to-practice qualifying examination (NPLEX). The CAND publishes the peer-reviewed journal CANDJ (candjournal.ca) in support of scientific research and evidence-informed practice; and vigorously supports professional regulation of naturopathic medicine across Canada in the interest of public protection.

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