

Supporting a Sustainable Health System

How BC's Naturopathic Doctors Support Innovative Change, Interdisciplinary Care Models & Reduce the Financial Burden on Government and Taxpayers
Submission to the Select Standing Committee on Health
from the British Columbia Naturopathic Association

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Executive Summary

This submission outlines the collective views of British Columbia's naturopathic doctors on the sustainability of health care. It focusses on the four key areas of inquiry, as outlined by the Select Standing Committee on Health, including:

- Long-term solutions that address the recruitment and retention of health care professionals in rural British Columbia
- A cost-effective system of primary and community care built around interdisciplinary teams
- Best practices for end-of-life care
- An enhanced effectiveness for addiction recovery programs

Our province has a remarkable number of well-educated and well-trained health professionals. The BC Government should be proud of the breadth and depth of talent offered in our health care sector.

British Columbia's regulatory environment for health professionals is amongst the best in the world. Our province's 22 regulatory colleges for health professionals are mandated to serve and protect the public. These regulatory colleges ensure that health professionals are qualified, competent and follow the clearly defined standards of practice and ethics. Colleges respond to complaints from patients and the public alike, and take immediate action when any member practices in a manner that is incompetent, unethical, illegal or impaired.

British Columbia's naturopathic doctors believe that the solutions to each of the Committee's areas of inquiry can be solved by a systematic process that removes barriers to care for all health professionals. Like many health professionals, naturopathic doctors have high levels of education and safety training to provide more health care services to patients than the current rules permit. The province's health care system needs to assess these barriers, decide if they make sense, and trust regulators to ensure that health professionals are meeting necessary qualifications and competencies.

With members practicing in all areas of the province, the BC Naturopathic Association has identified some areas where unnecessary barriers in regards to care exist. We propose some strategic recommendations for the Committee's considerations in order to make better use of these existing health professionals. Some of these recommendations will help in more than one of the Committee's areas of inquiry. In brief, our recommendations are as follows:

- **Make full use of existing health resources** by enabling all health professionals to practice to the extent of their competencies
- **Reduce barriers to lab access and federally controlled substances** to help naturopathic doctors provide a complete range of health services, in particular to rural patients and patients with addictions
- **Increase interdisciplinary care projects**, such as Inspire Health and Dr. Gabor Maté's addictions recovery program, through Health Ministry participation and resources, and through encouraging all health professionals to collaborate

- **Reduce barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration** by changing arbitrary rules that prevent naturopathic doctors from accessing hospitals, referring patients to other medical specialists, and from accessing hospice and other end-of-life care facilities
- **Integrate naturopathic doctors into existing Health Ministry programs** to benefit from additional perspectives and particularly our profession's focus on prevention

Introduction

Since 1923, BC's naturopathic doctors (NDs) have been providing primary care based on health promotion, disease prevention, and improving options for chronic care. With three years' university pre-med training and four years' training at an accredited naturopathic college, NDs are also the "doctors of BC."

The care provided by NDs saves BC taxpayers money. Care under an ND can reduce time spent in hospitals and other care facilities. Managing health risks as well as partnering with workplace wellness programs reduces sick time and increases productivity.

It is important to recognize that British Columbians choose to see naturopathic doctors. Patients seeing NDs pay for their own health care services. With a focus on non-drug alternatives, when appropriate, NDs prescribe fewer drugs than other prescribers, saving scarce publicly-funded PharmaCare resources.

Most importantly, naturopathic doctors focus on health care solutions. They work proactively with patients, government and other stakeholders to improve health outcomes. This work includes interdisciplinary strategies, health promotion, community outreach, and support for patient centred care. For NDs, it is not about fighting for a bigger piece of the health care budget; rather, it is about ensuring there are fewer arbitrary and unnecessary barriers in regards to care. By removing these barriers to the care naturopathic doctors provide, government could:

- Enhance patient choice
- Streamline the delivery of care
- Reduce the burden on the public health system
- Free up public health care dollars
- Improve patient outcomes
- Increase patient satisfaction

The recommendations included in this report do not require Health Ministry funding. In most cases, the proposals are simple policy changes focussed on sustainability and reducing government expenditures. We hope the Select Standing Committee on Health provides careful consideration of our recommendations; we would be happy to answer questions that Committee members may have about our submission.

About Naturopathic Medicine

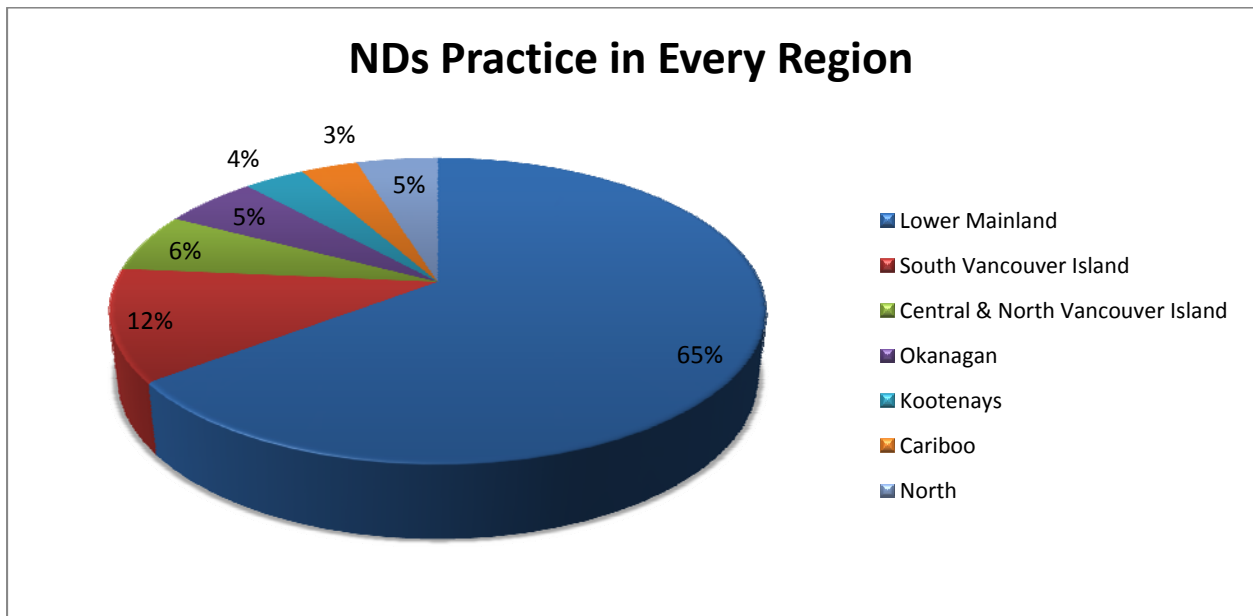
Naturopathic medicine includes the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease, as well as the promotion of health. It weaves together healing traditions from around the world with modern scientific principles and technology. Naturopathic medicine excels in the areas of preventive medicine, treatment of acute illness and chronic and degenerative disease—particularly those that may not have responded to other forms of treatment.

The College of Naturopathic Physicians of BC ensures all licensed NDs have completed pre-medical training at university, four years full-time at an accredited naturopathic college, and have passed internationally standardized board exams. The BC Naturopathic Association stresses that while NDs are trained and examined in complementary therapies, they must acquire a science based education equivalent to traditional MDs. In Oregon, the government regulator for academic colleges stated that:

...it would not be possible for an individual to pass all of the tests—which is necessary for licensure [as an ND]—without having a comprehensive foundation in the biological and biomedical sciences... In other words [a naturopathic medical college] has no choice but to prepare NDs with a biological and biomedical education of the same breadth and depth that prepares an MD to be a primary care physician.

This underscores the shared knowledge amongst NDs and MDs. The solid grounding in biomedical sciences prepares NDs to know when a referral is required or when emergency intervention is necessary. In cases where integration exists in BC, there have been improved patient outcomes as well as higher patient satisfaction. This is illustrated by a study published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal in June 2013 that found that patients who see naturopathic physicians in addition to receiving MD care can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

This sort of patient-centred care, facilitating best possible outcomes, is sought out by patients. In fact, naturopathic medicine is one of the fastest-growing medical fields in Canada. In BC, since 2001 there has been a 158 per cent increase in licensed NDs working in every corner of the province.



Patients of naturopathic doctors spend substantially more time each visit with their health care practitioner than conventional medicine permits. ND visits are designed to allow time to establish a detailed understanding of the patient's history, contributing factors to disease state(s), current health status, and treatment progress. They include physical exams, laboratory and diagnostic

testing, as needed, and result in individualized treatment plans. This is the foundation for patients who are better informed about their health and better equipped to manage their own health care.

Naturopathic Medicine and Rural Health Care

Delivering health services in rural settings is a challenge in this province. It always has been. Health care practitioners study in urban centres and then often want to stay there after graduation. Government incentives to have these graduates move to rural areas once trained have helped and continue to do so, but the problem continues and there is still much more progress to be made.

A simple and cost-effective way for the government to improve access to health professionals in rural settings is to leverage local professionals in these communities.

BC's naturopathic doctors practice in all corners of BC, delivering high-quality health care to patients. But all too often, these health care experts face barriers in delivering quality care. As a result patients suffer, especially in rural areas where access to health practitioners is not guaranteed.

The province's Health Ministry and its health authorities have established public information programs targeted at matching patients with health resources in rural areas. Further, the Health Ministry and its authorities have established working groups with health professionals to find new ways to enhance rural health care delivery.

However, there is a problem with these efforts.

In most cases, the government solely targets medical doctors and nurses. This approach overlooks the massive pool of licensed health experts including naturopathic doctors already living in rural areas who could be providing primary care to patients. As a result, patients are missing out.

Involving other health professionals in these public information programs and working groups will not come at additional cost. They already exist and function; it is simply a case of adding additional voices to the mix. Patients will benefit, and government will come closer to reaching its goal of meeting the health care needs of the rural population.

Medicine changes with the advent of new tests, procedures, medicines and scientific research. This leads to evolving discussion on care, policies and best practices. Naturopathic doctors need to be included in these evolving health care conversations from the get-go. All too often they learn about opportunities long after the decisions and policy have been determined and implemented. The government's ongoing tendency to focus solely on medical doctors and nurses limits patient choice. As the medical experts in disease prevention, NDs see an important role for in helping improve the entire health care system. As public servants are learning, and as health professionals know, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. It's better for patients and for the public purse to keep people healthy rather than treat them when they are sick. We are hopeful that the government will pave the way for enhanced health services to patients across BC.

There are other benefits to taking a broader view of rural health service delivery. Naturopathic doctors do not have their education subsidized by the province, they are opted out of MSP, and they don't create wage pressures for health authorities. Patients themselves pay for these services out of their own pockets because they value their health and see benefits from ND care. Naturopathic doctors have been licensed as doctors in BC since 1923 because they serve the health and well-being of BC citizens.

Additionally, two specific areas would improve access and effective care in rural areas.

Timely Access to Diagnostics: All medicine relies on science to inform and ensure efficacy of treatment. At the practice level, diagnostics are essential: Lab tests confirm or exclude diagnosis and verify that treatments are working in order to monitor prescription drug levels; and to screen for treatable conditions. Naturopathic doctors are educated, trained, examined and experienced in conducting routine diagnostics—but there is a barrier to responsive primary care. This barrier is felt most acutely in rural areas where health professionals are scarce. Under current rules put in place through the College of Physicians and Surgeons, only that profession can order lab tests—even though several other health professions share the competencies required to do so safely and effectively. The publicly funded, privately owned medical labs are in fact controlled by a single health profession with vested interests, rather than operating in the interest of the patient, taxpayer or medical system.

The BC Government made a commitment in its 2008 Speech from the Throne by stating that for naturopathic physicians, “restrictions on their access to medical labs for prescribed tests for patients will be removed.” Sue Paish, the President and CEO of LifeLabs, (which is the largest provider of diagnostic services in BC) has reviewed the care and follow-up on patients receiving diagnostic tests from NDs. Contrary to the policy, LifeLabs accepts requisitions from NDs. That policy nonetheless remains. The provincial government needs to realize it has a negative impact on patient care. For example, NDs in rural areas, without access to LifeLabs, are forced to send diagnostic tests to Alberta or the US, further reducing their ability to provide safe, effective and timely care.

Access to Clinically Effective Pharmaceuticals: The provincial government can also work collaboratively with NDs to help them gain access to certain medications that are controlled by the federal government. In the 2008 Speech from the Throne, the BC Government showed vision and leadership not only by promising access to diagnostics, but also in providing NDs with the ability to prescribe a full range of medications. This action, along with a host of others for various health professions, put BC at the forefront of all provinces in ensuring that health professionals could practice closer to the extent of their competencies. Naturopathic doctors in this province have been helping patients manage their prescriptions safely and effectively since 2010, saving government MSP fees by reducing concurrent MD visits, and providing this service to British Columbians with an excellent record of patient safety.

But NDs can do more. For example, at present, NDs can help women with hormonal therapies, but not men. This is because female hormonal therapies are regulated in the provincial drug schedule

while male hormonal therapies are regulated by the federal government. Several new classes of practitioners have been granted authority, under the CDSA and its regulations, for a limited schedule of federally controlled substances. It's vital NDs are included in this group.

Similarly, NDs can provide Pap smears for women. However, they can't refer for a colposcopy should this be required. Thus, while providing primary care to a female patient, they are unable to take essential, timely steps to ensure appropriate care when it is most necessary.

These two examples—hormonal therapy and comprehensive female patient care—highlight barriers to optimal care that present outsized impacts to patients in rural areas. It has been demonstrated that NDs have the regulatory structures and practitioner competencies to help patients, ensure safety and meet growing patient needs. The federal government needs to hear from the BC Health Ministry that it supports having NDs and other qualified prescribers provide effective care to patients.

Rural Health Recommendations:

- **Make full use of existing health resources** through enabling health professionals to practice to the extent of their competencies
- **Integrate naturopathic doctors into existing Health Ministry programs:** The benefits include an enhanced focus on disease prevention and non-pharmaceutical health care solutions
- **Reduce barriers to lab access and federally controlled substances** to help naturopathic doctors provide a more complete range of health services to rural patients

Delivering Care to Rural Patients

Dr. Chris Spooner operates the Paradigm Naturopathic Medicine clinic in Vernon, which delivers interdisciplinary health care to patients from both small-town and rural BC. His clinic specializes in complicated cases of complex chronic disease and integrative oncology.

He has seen a surge in demand for naturopathic medicine since he started practicing in Vernon eight years ago. In fact, despite the fact he opened his clinic in March 2014 and works 50-hour weeks, he already has a one-month waitlist.

“There are four factors that bring patients to me,” Dr. Spooner explained. “The first is that patients are dissatisfied with how their problems are addressed in the health system, the second is the shortage of family doctors delivering primary care, the third is an interest in alternatives to drug-based therapies, and the fourth is the good reputation I have for delivering better health outcomes for my patients.”

His patients tell him it is difficult to access health care in the region. “There is a shortage of family doctors in the North Okanagan,” Dr. Spooner said. “I see patients from Scotch Creek, for example, who can’t find a GP anywhere in the valley and there has been a rash of GP retirements in the area recently.”

The College of Physicians & Surgeons online *Find a Physician* tool showed only four family doctors accepting new patients within 100km of Vernon at the start of November, 2014. But patients still need health care.

“I opened my clinic in March 2014 and work 50 hours a week, but I already have a one-month waitlist,” Dr. Spooner said. “I have bolstered my clinic with an additional ND, in addition to the nutritionist, massage therapist, counsellor and registered nurse I already have in my clinic.”

Dr. Spooner saw a real surge in demand for naturopathic medicine in 2010, when BC’s naturopathic physicians began prescribing drugs. He believes the BC Government showed vision when making that change, and also fiscal prudence as he helps patients manage their prescriptions outside of MSP billings.

“While most of my patients want alternatives to drug-based therapies, I am a science-based provider of health care services and I know when drugs are required,” Dr. Spooner said. “The difference between my practice and that of an MD is that I can give the patient alternative therapies to help with their condition in addition to drugs, so that they can improve their overall health and in some instances reduce their reliance on pharmaceuticals.”

He has seen change in other health professionals’ willingness to collaborate in interdisciplinary teams, in particular through leveraging his expertise in integrative cancer treatment and chronic disease management.

“I’m working with oncologists and other health professionals to align with work the BC Cancer Agency is doing and I know of other NDs who are working with them,” Dr. Spooner said. “I’m also adjunct faculty at UBC Okanagan, and I’m working with the Institute for Healthy Living and Chronic Disease Prevention on a community clinic research model. I’ve noticed a true appetite for interdisciplinary care emerging in BC.”

Cost Effective Primary and Community Care through Interdisciplinary Teams

Interdisciplinary teams are the future of health care. Patients expect health care providers to work collaboratively for their benefit: They have seen the results that come from different approaches and they want a broader range of services than any single profession can provide. Pockets of resistance remain amongst traditional gatekeepers to health services who feel threatened by interdisciplinary care, but younger health professionals are seeking opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary work to broaden their experience and improve the care provided.

Naturopathic doctors have been working in interdisciplinary settings for decades. NDs work collaboratively with MDs, massage therapists, nurses, physiotherapists, chiropractors, and other practitioners. BCNA members participate in the leading-edge interdisciplinary committees and teams working in BC today, such as Inspire Health, the BC Women's Hospital, and the BC Centre for Disease Control.

Collaboration & Integration in Action

The Complex Chronic Disease Program at Women's Hospital in Vancouver is a unique multidisciplinary clinic providing integrated, evidence based care for patients across the province. Eight specialists on staff see patients suffering from Lyme disease, fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue. A key member of the team is naturopathic physician Gaetano Morello. Dr. Morello is now in his second year at the CCDP; he provides care to a growing number of patients, two days per week. The clinic is fully funded under MSP.

"The CCDP is providing comprehensive care in the truest sense, enabling patients to improve their physical, social and mental well-being. Collectively, our team seeks to provide collaborative care, focussed not just on symptoms but in reducing and preventing symptoms, developing evidence based unique protocols, and incorporating a range of care," notes Dr. Morello.

Dr. Morello is the first ND in Canada to be employed by a hospital. While there are many NDs and MDs in private practice, working in tandem or in consultation as part of a team, there are however regulatory barriers keeping NDs from joining hospital care teams. This is unfortunate, as there is a need to foster better interdisciplinary relationships: Improving care and outcomes with a multidisciplinary approach has been shown in a hospital setting to significantly reduce costs. In the CCDP example, the success of a truly integrated team will reduce costs but also hopefully lead to more collaborative projects in other care facilities.

"The benefit of working alongside MD specialists, is that we can share medical expertise, and while patient care is improved, so too are the sometime misunderstandings between professionals that have, in the past, prevented best practices," Dr. Morello said.

Naturopathic medicine benefits both the patient and the public purse. Cost savings to government are amplified when patients access interdisciplinary care providers who provide service outside MSP or who do not draw on health authority budgets. And the benefits of including naturopathic medicine in interdisciplinary care teams is evident: A 2014 US study in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* found that naturopathic medicine decreased patients' risks for cardiovascular disease and provided average savings of \$1,138 in societal costs and \$1,187 in employer costs.

Despite joint efforts amongst practitioners, province wide, to improve multidisciplinary care, barriers remain. Some barriers require government intervention to resolve.

As mentioned above, naturopathic doctors serve as the primary care physician—the family doctor—for thousands of British Columbians. But, if those NDs serving as

primary caregivers diagnose a condition that requires a referral to a specialist, they are unable to make that referral and the patient must visit a conventional medical doctor to get testing and care.

Moreover, if a patient of an ND is admitted to a hospital, the ND is unable to care for their patient, even concurrent with the attending GP. This is not streamlined delivery of care, and it wastes taxpayer dollars by forcing patients to draw unnecessarily on MSP for conventional MDs.

Similar to provincial government programs to educate rural British Columbians about health care providers, our members find themselves systemically excluded from the ongoing dialogue about the future of interdisciplinary care in BC. We recommend involving a broader range of health professionals in these discussions to ensure that more voices are heard regarding how to shape the health care system now and into the future, at no additional cost to the province.

Interdisciplinary Care Recommendations:

- **Encourage more interdisciplinary care projects** such as Inspire Health through Health Ministry participation and resources, and through encouraging all health professionals to collaborate
- **Integrate naturopathic doctors into existing Health Ministry programs** to benefit from additional perspectives and particularly our profession's focus on prevention
- **Reduce barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration** by changing arbitrary rules that prevent naturopathic doctors from accessing hospitals or referring patients to other medical specialists

Best Practices for End-of-Life Care

As family doctors for thousands of British Columbians, naturopathic doctors establish lifelong relationships with patients who sometimes require palliative care. This stage of life, which is already difficult for the patient, their family, and their health care provider, becomes even more difficult because of disruption in care resulting from arbitrary barriers.

Barriers to care in a hospital extend to private care facilities. This includes hospice care where patients can be severed from their family ND.

There is no reason for this to continue. We recommend working together to identify where these arbitrary barriers exist in legislation, regulation and or policy. We want to find solutions that ensure that patients can maintain relationships with their primary care providers in ways that do not compromise safety.

End-of-Life Care Recommendations:

- **Reduce barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration** by changing arbitrary rules that prevent naturopathic doctors from accessing hospice and other end-of-life care facilities

Effectiveness of Addictions Recovery Programs

Naturopathic doctors help patients with addictions recovery. In fact, NDs are one of a very small group of health professionals who provide primary health care as well as counselling services. And NDs have contributed to pioneering work in interdisciplinary teams that help patients struggling with addiction.

Private Practice, Public Service

There is a general trend towards interest in and demand for patient-centred health care. Studies have documented that in today's information-driven environment, people have a greater awareness of nutrition, wellness and disease prevention. But not all segments of society can access complementary medical care—especially those who might need it most.

Acknowledging not just the desire, but the need for naturopathic care in the greater community, the Family Naturopathic Clinic (FNC) in Victoria opened its doors to low-income parented young families in 2007. The waiting list continues to grow. With two-thirds of Canadians using some form of complementary medicine, it's no surprise to document the success of the FNC venture.

The FNC provides free medical services to young families. "We provide primary care, free of charge, in a comprehensive and compassionate environment to 30 families per month" notes co-founder Dr. Amy Gilchrist. "Many of our patients are seeking valid alternatives to drug regimens, and need long visits to address complex health concerns and assess complex health histories." At the FNC young parents are given the time to discuss their health and invited to be part of the team to develop solutions. "At the FNC we see that support like this can improve a variety of health markers. We see improvements in nutrition, stress management, and mental health. With time we've documented that this kind of care can help empower young parents to make decisions for themselves and their children that create a positive cycle of change. Empowerment like this can sometimes be a foothold out of poverty for these families."

As one mother put it, "I am a better mother because of this project and my son has an improved quality of life."

The FNC operates entirely on individual and community donations and support. No government monies are provided for operational overhead. In addition, the FNC provides residency training for students at accredited naturopathic medical schools.

Dr. Gilchrist concludes "Our goal at the FNC is to provide optimal health care to young low income families - care that meets parents where they are and helps them to achieve their goals. As these young parents become healthier, their children become healthier. This all trickles down to healthier communities for all of us."

The naturopathic approach to addiction recovery responds to patient needs. Naturopathic doctors help patients through functional medical assessments to determine conditions that contribute to addictive behaviours, individualized withdrawal and recovery programs, and nutritional and lifestyle counselling. They foster change in patients who had previously engaged in destructive lifestyle habits so that a new, addiction free and healthier lifestyle emerges. Addiction recovery is more than quitting drugs or alcohol. Addiction recovery is about maintaining a healthy and productive life.

Internationally-renowned addictions expert and medical doctor, Dr. Gabor Maté, has worked in Vancouver's downtown eastside for over 12 years helping patients with hard-core drug addictions. He brought together naturopathic doctors and other experts for an innovative approach to addiction recovery that couples nutritional and dietary strategies with exercise to balance brain chemistry and glandular function—a common but frequently ignored contributor to addiction.

Naturopathic doctors can do even more to help patients recover from their addictions. As mentioned above, we hope government can partner with us to advocate for access to certain federally-controlled substances.

Addictions Recovery Recommendations:

- **Encourage more interdisciplinary care projects** such as Dr. Maté's addictions recovery program through Health Ministry participation and resources, and through encouraging all health professionals to collaborate
- **Reduce barriers to federally controlled substances** to help naturopathic doctors provide a more complete range of health services to patients with addictions

Conclusion

Over decades, our health care system has evolved through a series of choices — or lack thereof. As demonstrated in this report, improvements to diagnostic access, referrals to specialists, and reducing barriers to interdisciplinary care, would not only improve the delivery of health care by naturopathic doctors, but to patients across BC.

Recognizing existing resources, and capitalizing on primary and community care opportunities, is at the heart of this submission. Many of the key challenges facing British Columbia's health care system can be resolved and improved by a more coordinated approach to ensuring care is provided by a broader range of health professionals. Studies show that naturopathic medicine is beneficial to care and patient usage shows that there is a demand. And, more importantly, these strategies do not drain the public purse.

Health care delivery in rural areas can be improved by making better use of the existing resources, as can interdisciplinary care, end-of-life care, and addictions recovery. All it takes is for elected officials to ask if the existing barriers make sense for patients and why they should be changed—then apply the political will to make it happen.