

NAPRAPATHY (article)

Novelist Saul Bellow once remarked that Chicagoans often fail to acknowledge their heroes and concerning the origins of naprapathy, this is indeed the case. Beyond the naprapaths, themselves, it's unlikely very many people have ever heard of Oakley Smith, the young turn-of-the-century chiropractor who first formulated the principles of naprapathy and established the school which is still in existence today.

Naprapathic offices are unique to Chicago. and when you're looking for them, you'll see them everywhere. But visit another part of the country and nobody will know what you're talking about. The big exception is Sweden (that's right, Sweden!) where naprapathy was exported years ago and where naprapathic practitioners actually outnumber chiropractors.

In Illinois, the two professions have been at loggerheads for years. Ten years ago, the chiros were successful in convincing the state licensing board to declare naprapathy illegal (it had not been included in the Medical Practice Act), and temporarily shut the school down. Only after a bitter and expensive legal struggle did naprapathy survive, although only with a limited license allowing them to practice by referral from a physician.

All this because Oakley Smith believed the real source of disease lay in the soft tissues of the body (muscles, ligaments, tendons) instead of the spine as he had been originally taught. Both chiropractic and naprapathy believe that healing energies can be blocked by the musculoskeletal system. This concept of energies that have healing capabilities, whether invisible forces, or simply referring to those carried by blood vessels and nerve pathways, has historical counterparts in Oriental and Ayurvedic medicine, Reiki, and many fields of alternative health care.

In naprapathy, these blockages appear as muscular contractions throughout the body in response to psychological conflicts, physical injuries, poor nutrition, and improper posture. The practitioner gently palpates connective tissue, feeling for areas that are rigid or painful. Then, with a series of rhythmic manipulations, called 'directos,' initiates a stretch and release of the contraction. Once tension is cleared, there is restoration of proper nerve and blood flow, healing energies travel without obstruction, and proper body functioning begins again .

The word naprapathy is derived from the Czech 'naprapavit' (to correct), and the Greek 'pathos' (suffering). Naprapathy means 'to correct the cause of suffering.' A full naprapathic treatment program is not just confined to the soft tissue analysis, but usually includes nutritional counseling, exercise and relaxation techniques. Aware of their limitations regarding conventional medicine, virtually every naprapath I know is perfectly willing to refer his patient to an M.D. when the expected response to therapy may not be forthcoming.

The big hoop-la about the legal status of naprapaths in Illinois (which is just about the only place they have any sizable presence) seems to have ended to the satisfaction of all parties concerned although it may take awhile before all the ill-will generated finally dissipates. The school has reopened and is thriving. When a naprapath can successfully teach a community exactly what he's doing, and how he'll differ from the chiropractor, his practice will grow quickly.

Interestingly enough, mainstream medicine in the form of the Illinois State Medical Society, went to bat for the naprapaths in their effort toward licensure. There may have been several reasons for this. First, you can be a naprapath in much less time than it takes to be a chiropractor, and conventional physicians didn't buy the argument that only chiropractors should be licensed because their education takes so long. Second, to a physician, the source of musculoskeletal pain is indeed in the soft tissues and not in the bones of the spine. Last, institutional medicine is still smarting from the Supreme Court decision which accused them of anti-trust violations when

they attempted to block chiropractic access to insurance coverage and hospital privileges. At any rate, the outcome is acceptable to all.

Personally, I like naprapathy and refer patients to naprapaths quite frequently. Body aches and pains are indeed lodged in the connective tissue and the source of discomfort is usually a combination of spasm and nerve irritation. An impressive array of physical complaints respond nicely to naprapathic manipulations. Most commonly treated are back, neck, hip, and joint problems which in turn may produce a variety of systemic complaints: low energy, tension headaches, digestive disorders, or unexplained psychological depression.

Taking a cue from the psychiatric work of Wilhelm Reich on 'structural armoring,' one naprapath I know gets referrals from psychotherapists and specializes in helping to release trapped and unexpressed emotions through bodywork. More and more psychiatrists are appreciating how 'talk therapy' in conjunction with regular bodywork can speed up the treatment of a longstanding emotional issue.