



A Qualitative Study of Naturopathic Medicine in Ghana

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Background: Naturopathic medicine is currently undergoing revolution in Ghana as a result of the establishment of the Nyarkotey College of Holistic Medicine. The purpose of this establishment is to train Naturopaths and Naturopathic Doctors in Ghana. **Objectives:** This study evaluates the qualitative aspect of Naturopathic Medicine in primary healthcare delivery from the perspective of Naturopathic care givers in Ghana. **Methods:** This study is qualitative in nature and aims at examining the pull factors that drive consumers to Naturopathic medicine in Ghana. The study also assesses clients' push factors from mainstream medicine. **Results:** Respondents opined that, though, Naturopathic medicine is an integral part of the healthcare delivery system in Ghana; there are a plethora of challenges that need immediate attention. **Conclusion:** Naturopathic remedies are integral parts of the Ghanaian healthcare delivery system and there is therefore the need for robust healthcare policy to help regulate the Naturopathic profession to aid integration in the healthcare system.

Keywords: Naturopathy, Healthcare policy, Primary healthcare, Profession, Scope.

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INTRODUCTION

Naturopathic Medicine is a system of medical healthcare delivery which is currently new to the Ghanaian healthcare system. Interestingly, there are many who have still not heard about naturopathic remedies. Naturopathic medicine is a distinct system of healthcare system which is prevalent in North America, Latin America, Europe, India and many others with distinct Naturopathic legislations. The case is different in Ghana and in West Africa entirety.

In Ghana, there are those who assume that Naturopathy is equivalent to African Traditional or herbal Medicine practice. Little do they know that herbal medicine is just one aspect of Naturopathic medicine? Naturopathy is basically the general practice of natural remedies. The difference between a Naturopathic doctor and a Naturopath is the educational difference; nonetheless, they basically employ the same philosophy in treatment of their clients.

Naturopathy therefore plays a significant role in our healthcare industry especially in tackling chronic diseases. Chronic cases are a major challenge in Ghana. Obu, (2020) explained that, cancers such as prostate, breast and cervical have skyrocketed with basically no policy on intervention such as screening, awareness and advocacy as compared to the developed countries. The author further opined that, the disease accounts for about 80% mortality in men.

The ultimate goal of primary healthcare is to give healthcare services to all manner of people and families in any locality or country. As a result, Obu, (2020) argues that medicine is not in competition, thus mainstream and alternative medical systems can coexist. A previous study by Obu, (2014), recognized the disunity in Ghana's medical sector with regards to mainstream and naturopathic medicine, which has in turn resulted in high mortality rates.

This notwithstanding, Obu, (2014) argues that there is a role of Naturopathic medicine in primary healthcare delivery and improving quality of life care (QOL) in prostate cancer patients if incorporated. This qualitative study evaluates Naturopathic practitioners' perspective on whether Obu, (2014)'s arguments on Naturopathic remedies are true, specifically their role in primary healthcare.

METHODOLOGY

This study embraces the qualitative (open-ended) approach to evaluate naturopathic medicines in primary healthcare in Ghana. The qualitative case study focused on three areas for this research:

- i. The challenges of Naturopathic doctors in their practice as primary healthcare givers in Ghana.
- ii. Analyses the pull factors that drive consumers to Naturopathic remedies from the perspectives of the practitioners.
- iii. Finally, the qualitative study examines the opinions of Naturopathic doctors on the consumers' push factors using Ghana as a case model.

The Questionnaire

A drafted questionnaire was employed to collect primary data from the respondents for the study. The questionnaire entails a set of open-ended questions administered to 30 respondents. The respondents in this study were selected practitioners of Naturopathic medicine who are members of Ghana Naturopathic Physicians Association, Tema, Community, 7. The respondents' feedbacks were edited and analyzed. The feedbacks were almost the same, hence, we have extracted five and used for this report.

RESULTS

We adopted Pseudonyms to help protect respondents' anonymity. Survey questions in this section that were asked and addressed were:

- i. Tell me a little about Yourself.
- ii. Tell me a little bit about your Professional Journey in Naturopathic practice
- iii. Why do consumers opt for Naturopathic medicine (Pull factors)?
- iv. What are some of the general challenges of Naturopathic practitioners?
- v. What are some of the consumers' challenges with Naturopathic therapies?
- vi. What are some of the push factors from consumers with regards to Mainstream Medicine?
- vii. Is the Regulatory body performing their duties to your satisfaction?

RESULT ON NARRATIVES

Nana Yaa

Nana Yaa is a registered Naturopathic Practitioner and operates a private facility in the

Ashaiman Municipality. She has been practicing for more than five years. She entered into the practice through the apprenticeship system. She received no medical education in natural medicine but holds a First Degree in Education and a Master's Degree from Russia. She is currently a level 200, second semester Naturopathic Medical Student at the Nyarkotey College of Holistic Medicine and a member of the Ghana Naturopathic Physicians Association. She is pursuing a Diploma in Naturopathic Medicine.

Nana Yaa, believes that, the practice of Naturopathic Medicine is totally different from what it is usually perceived to be in Ghana. She realized this after entering the Naturopathic Medical School. She thinks that, practicing Naturopathic Medicine without first going to the Naturopathic Medical School should be abolished in Ghana especially those practicing alternative medicine, as they are doing a disservice to the public. On her assertion on the pull factors to Naturopathic medicine from the views of the consumers, she explained: "The goal of naturopathic practice is to treat underlying disorders and to restore normal body function by enhancing the body's own healing abilities. Therefore, naturopathic physicians focus their efforts on understanding the unique needs of each patient. Also, Naturopathic doctors assist the body's healing powers by using safe, effective non-pharmaceutical approaches with patients. As a result, naturopathic treatments are highly individualized. Additionally, Patients are involved in their treatment programs and learn to make effective, educated self-care decisions, which can prevent future health problems".

Nana Yaa, also believes that, though Naturopathic Medicine is beneficial to consumers, the practice is not without challenges. She opined: "Few naturopathic treatments have known side effects and risks. Also, Supplements; such as vitamins and herbal; may interfere with prescription medications. In large doses, certain vitamins may increase risk of diseases like cancer. Besides, Spinal adjustment such as naturopathic manipulative treatment to the spine can damage arteries, nerves, bones, and spinal discs. In rare cases, it may lead to a stroke" She also agrees that, Detox diets meant to rid of your body of toxins which involves cutting out certain foods or fasting; which mean going for periods without eating; can be dangerous for people with some chronic conditions, like diabetes. "If you're on the diet for a long time, you run the risk of not getting enough vital nutrients".

Nana Yaa, also asserts that, apart from practitioners' challenges, consumers also express their own challenges as well. Thus, in answering the question "what are some of the consumers' challenges with Naturopathic therapies?", she narrates that, though consumers have much trust in the practice, conventional medicine doctors have found means to relate

naturopathic practice to quackery. She is also of the view that, low level formal education in the field for practitioners is a major challenge.

Nana Yaa, finally, on what drives consumers from the mainstream sector (push factors), narrates: "But with the medical doctors, patients are expected to revisit the hospital for treatment and they are not allowed to take any medications without the doctor's consent. Therefore, they are not part or involved in their treatment programs"

Felicia

Felicia on the other hand has been practicing Naturopathic medicine for ten years in the Shai-Osudoku district, in the greater Accra region, Ghana. She practically has no professional training and sufficed through the system using the apprenticeship system. She is registered by the Traditional and Alternative Medicine Practice Council, based on ACT 575. She is currently a level 200, Diploma student in Naturopathic Medicine at Nyarkotey College of Holistic Medicine, Tema Community, 7, and currently on her one-year clinical clerkship at the Tema General Hospital. On her assertion on the pull factors, she narrates: "People go for natural medicine because they think they are more effective, less expensive, easy to access and have less side effects on the individual"

On the challenges, she posits that, practitioners face standardization problems. Also, the issue of formidable association in Naturopathic practice is a complicated issue in Ghana, that needs redress to promote the industry. This notwithstanding, she narrates, "there are many reasons that push consumers to Naturopathic medicine. For instance, she cites side effects from Pharmaceutical and surgical procedures and inaccessibility of hospitals and health centers as the predominating factors".

Kwaku

Kwaku seemed to value the practice of Naturopathy. He is however, a network marketing person in nutritional supplementation. He is an unregistered practitioner with no professional medical training in Naturopathic modalities. He is however a member of the Ghana Association of Naturopathic Physicians. He is very articulate and skillful in his network marketing business with supplements in the Ashaiman municipality. He intends to study Naturopathic Medicine in the future at the Nyarkotey College of Holistic Medicine. As a business man, he believes that, there are many reasons for the robust movement of consumers to Naturopathic medicines (Pull factors). According to Kwaku, "Individuals and people who are health conscious go for naturopathic medicine based on scientific research. Again, naturopathic medicine helps the body's immune system to fight diseases. Due to this fact, naturopathic medicine helps in chronic disease more than Allopathic medicine

and ultimately, it has less side's effect on the human body".

Kwaku, also agrees that though Naturopathic medicine has challenges of its own, influential people purchased his supplements. He says, people who procure naturopathic medicine have high expectations on fast recovery. Nonetheless, naturopathic medicine doesn't work that way, and as a result, they feel disappointed and begin to complain. Also, the healing crisis some patients go through in naturopathic medicine is so severe which most patients give up on the treatment. He says: "The most challenging aspect in the naturopathic practice is that the public don't understand the essence and efficacy of naturopathic medicine. And this is why we have to go out and educate the public on naturopathy".

Kwaku, also posits that, his influential and powerful clients in society do raise some challenges they also have with regards to Naturopathic medicine. According to Kwaku, consumers have raised issues such as failure to follow prescriptions, quitting medication due to financial hardships and additionally, "adopting other practitioners advise alongside the guidelines given by their initial practitioner".

Finally, Kwaku, touched on the push factors from his clients' perspective as to why they are moving away from mainstream medicine. For Kwaku, his clients touched on the fact that conventional health facilities are inaccessible and also the fact that they have to queue for many hours before seeing the doctors. In contrast, Naturopathic health facilities are very accessible. He narrates: "People spend many hours at the hospitals before seeing a doctor; reasons being that doctors are either in a meeting or at the theater from morning till noon, with only emergency cases being attended to in such situations. Conventional health doctors at the public facilities like going on strike but Naturopathy Doctors are always available. Also, most of the Conventional Health Doctors, especially at the Public health facilities, don't have time for the patients compared to Naturopathy Doctors. The Naturopathic doctors call their patients to follow up on them".

Kwame,

Kwame apparently, received some training in Naturopathic medicine and has been practicing for over 5 years now. He is a registered Naturopathic practitioner by the Traditional and Alternative Medicine Practice Council, based on ACT, 575. To improve himself, he is also a level 200, Diploma in Naturopathic Medicine student on his clinical clerkship at the Tema General Hospital. He also works in an herbal hospital in Achimota. Kwame, who attends to more patients on a daily basis, is also in agreement that, his clients assert that, the pull factors are numerous. However, patients are of the view that, the goal of naturopathic practice is to treat underlying disorders and to restore normal body

function by enhancing the body's own healing abilities. Therefore, naturopathic physicians focus their efforts on understanding the unique needs of each patient. He writes, "Naturopathic doctors assist the body's healing powers by using safe, effective non-pharmaceutical approaches with patients. As a result, naturopathic treatments are highly individualized. Patients are involved in their treatment programs and learn to make effective, educated self-care decisions, which can prevent future health problems".

Kwame, also laments on the challenges he faces as a practitioner in Naturopathic medicine. He is of the view that, Patients are faced with financial challenges due to the fact that naturopathic medicines are not captured on the NHIS platform. Also, low understanding among the general populace on how naturopathic medicine works though effective; but slowly. He is also of the view that, poor practice from people with less knowledge in the field of naturopathic medicine has made a lot of patients face complications from conditions. He writes, "A huge challenge facing the practice is inadequate formal education in the field which has led to the criticism of the naturopathic practice as being quackery. Poor regulations of practitioners are also a challenge. There are limited continuous professional development programs to help practitioners to update themselves with the nature of disease. Lack of a National Herbarium that will allow compilation of medicinal plants and their respective phytochemicals is also an issue, together with improper records keeping of various conditions that will allow practitioners be able to defend a condition with evidence of medical records"

Kwame, also asserts that, though the practice has many challenges, it has benefitted many consumers. However, consumers explained that some herbs have potent and powerful ingredients and should be taken with the same level of caution and directions as pharmaceutical medications. Some also opined that complementary alternative medicines are very effective against disease and enhance general health and wellbeing. This could also account for the push factors from the mainstream practice. However, per Kwame's accounts, consumers have explained that, "Naturopathic Doctors (NDs) treat patients as individuals by addressing the physical, environmental, lifestyle, attitudinal, and emotional aspects of health. This allows naturopathic doctors to find and treat the cause of the disease, not just symptoms, using a variety of therapies".

Nortey,

Mr. Nortey is 45years and has been practicing Naturopathic medicine for over 10years. He has no formal training in Naturopathic medicines. He manufactures and sell them without Food and Drugs Authority (FDA) approval in the Ashaiman Municipality. He is a member of the Ghana Association

of Naturopathic Physicians and currently, level 200, Diploma in Naturopathic Medicine student at Nyarkotey College of Holistic Medicine, on his clinical clerkship now at Tema General Hospital. He says, he had practiced Naturopathic medicine for many years but interestingly, he didn't know what he was actually doing until he got the right education at Nyarkotey College of Holistic Medicine. He was more than happy to be trained clinically at Tema General Hospital for six months. For him, there are many challenges in the practice of Naturopathic Medicines. He says, "NDs face patients not telling the practitioner the truth when trying to inquire about their medical history. And because the treatment is affordable, they assume it is ineffective. The recognition is too down so they take NDs for granted. Meanwhile, these medicines treat the whole body. One major challenge in Ghana is that Naturopathic centers are always in corners after blue kiosks and rough directions. There are no proper regulations. Hiring of unqualified relatives to provide services and limited support from the leadership of the country in terms of researches and formulations".

On his part, he believed that, the consumers also have many challenges, though they seek for services at these facilities. According to him, consumers have complained that the volumes of medicines they have to consume, especially with the liquid medicines, before they see their condition improve is too high. For instance, some patients explained that, they have to drink 30mls of medicine four times daily for 14days. He narrates, "Unstandardized way of preparing some of their medicines is a major issue. If you compare two of the same products with different batch numbers from the same facility, sometimes the colour or texture or the taste are different because the manufacturing procedures are not standardized. They find it difficult to differentiate between qualified and unqualified Naturopathic practitioners due to lack of an effective regulation in the system". He asserts that consumers further complained of "the lack of qualification and training among Naturopathic practitioners and the surge of adverse effects of herbal medicines are still on the rise, because most of them don't have the requisite formal training to understand the pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics of phytochemicals and interactions with other herbal products". "Others also complained of poor packaging". He says, "Packaging of some of their products are very scary, offensive and put lots of people off. Their advertising strategies are sometimes noisy and offensive to the conventional health practitioners", he concluded.

Mike

Michael, Naturopathic practitioner and also a member of Ghana Naturopathic Physicians Association practicing for over 15 years in Kumasi, Ashanti region. He is currently a level 100, Diploma in Naturopathic Medicine student at Nyarkotey College of Holistic Medicine. He is of the views that, many are the driving

forces behind consumers opting for natural medicines. He also cited fewer side effects as the major driving force. With regards to challenges of the practitioners, he posits that, they are unaccountable. He believes that, the key challenge of practitioners has to do with getting FDA approval for products. Besides, Business branding and packaging of their products, fear of competition from others once they reveal their product constituents. He narrates, “The different groups and associations formed by practitioners make it difficult to have one voice to push the agenda of CAM at the national level”. He also explained with regards to consumers concerns, they have raised the fact that, “They feel the regulatory bodies to control the system are not doing much so the unqualified ones are discrediting the professionalism of the qualified ones. For example, most of such facilities have not been licensed. The influx of unapproved foreign natural medicine through unapproved routes is on the increase. This is causing lots of adverse reactions among clients, endangering the confidence people have in the Naturopathic medicine industry”. He also states to the fact that, “Enough documentation and research have not been done on most of the botanical medicines used in the industry. As a result, the explanations given to the mechanism of actions of most of the medicines don't have any scientific evidence; it's about beliefs. Finally, Research funding and facilities to undertake proper scientific research into botanical medicines are not available, so practitioners are sometimes limited to appreciate the scientific information about the indications of some of the Naturopathic medicines”

CONCLUSIONS

We observed that, Naturopathic Medicine is practice by many in Ghana. However, these practitioners are practicing with limited formal knowledge in the field of Naturopathy. Additionally, the scope of Naturopathy practice is not well defined in Ghana. This could be due to legislation weakness to address the issue of Naturopathy in Ghana. Additionally, absence of recognized national Naturopathic medicine college for many years until the emergence of the Nyarkotey College of Holistic Medicine was a major challenge in Naturopathic education. Hence, we conclude and recommend that, since Naturopathy is integral in the primary healthcare delivery in Ghana, the Government and healthcare policy makers need to pass the legislation on Traditional and Alternative Medicine which obviously

will propel Ghana into a different stage of the practice of Naturopathic medicine.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical consideration for this case study research was obtained from the President of Ghana Association of Naturopathic Physicians (GANP), the umbrella body of graduate Naturopathic doctors and Naturopaths in Ghana.

Conflict of Interest

We declare that there is no conflict of interest in terms of ownership of shares, consultancy, speaker's honoraria or research grants from commercial companies or professional or governmental organizations with an interest in the topic of the paper.

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