

NCNM Student Remarks

This letter was submitted to the United States Department of Education January 19, 1990

Stephen Pappas
Accrediting Agency Evaluation Branch, Room 3036
U.S. Department of Education
7th and 'D' Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Mr. Pappas:

I am a 1984 graduate of National College of Naturopathic Medicine (NCNM) in Portland, and, while I fervently wish that the College and the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education could live up to the dreams and the philosophical tenets they espouse, there are many reasons why that is unlikely to occur.

I'll make no effort to keep this letter brief, because I believe the issues involved are too important, and I hope to give you a complete and accurate account of my experience with the College. I think it also will become clear to you why I believe that, although mine is probably a minority opinion among naturopathic ranks, I'm one of the few recent attendees at NCNM who will give you an accurate appraisal of that institution's ability to educate responsible physicians.

In 1979, having completed my pre-medical education at California Polytechnic State University (San Luis Obispo), majoring in Chemistry, and also having decided, after working in a community hospital there, that I would not pursue an M.D. degree, I applied to NCNM for admission.

I was motivated to attend NCNM after having read an article, "Naturopathic Medicine," by Bill Tribe, in the Berkeley Holistic Health Handbook. I enclose a photocopy for your review; I'm sure that you will agree that the ideals and philosophy expressed there are noble and appealing, especially to a young person who's recently become disillusioned with conventional medicine.

I was elated when I was accepted for admission to NCNM in the Spring of 1979. I later learned that few applicants were turned away, and that my 3.73 GPA in Chemistry and good performance on the Medical College Admissions Test made me a very unusual enrollee for the College.

During my first year of attendance at NCNM, although the College's physical plant was abysmal, and some of my instructors were less-than-skillful lecturers, I perceived a healthy emphasis on academic achievement. The class of 1984 was taught some anatomy, physiology, histology and biochemistry. My \$1300/term tuition payments were not unjustifiable.

I knew, at the time that I was admitted to NCNM, that the college was going to be moved. But no final decision had been made about where the new campus was going to be. By the end of the 1980-81 academic year, the administration had decided to purchase an abandoned school in the Linnton area, north of Portland.

Prior to the start of the 1981-2 academic year, I received notification that the College was, instead, purchasing the old Portland Christian High School in SE Portland, and extensive

remodeling was underway to render the building suitable for our purposes. At the time, I thought, “Didn’t the College already put a substantial down payment on the Linnton School?” They had.

During my second and third years at NCNM, the College’s financial problems became increasingly apparent. The College’s imprudent chief financial officer, Greg McKown, was dismissed, and the College’s Board of Trustees fired Dr. Janet Harris from the position of President at the College. Dr. Harris was an intelligent and responsible educator of unquestionable integrity, and the majority of students protested her dismissal. I made an unsuccessful attempt to marshal support for a student “strike,” advocating refusal to pay tuition until we could be assured that our tuition payments would be used, to some reasonable extent, for educational expenses, rather than to pay off building contractors who had suspended work in the middle of the remodeling. I asked that the student body be provided with detailed financial information, and be allowed to make informed decisions about whether we wanted to remain in attendance, paying \$1600/term at NCNM, or organize a new college, leaving the Board to deal with their problems. The board would not provide that information in written form. I was told verbally that “we” had liabilities of several hundreds of thousands of dollars, that the Linnton property was being foreclosed, and that NCNM was losing \$60,000 equity on that investment.

The student body, as a whole, was not savvy enough to understand the way in which financial pressure was causing the Board to act against the interests of the students. Naturopathic students tend to be more idealistic than average; their minds are easily clouded by considerations of tradition and philosophical rhetoric. NCNM has existed, in various incarnations, since 1955. Consider also the fact that most of the students were intent on getting their degrees at any cost, and you’ll understand the high level of resistance that I encountered when I suggested that perhaps NCNM should be scrapped because it was not a viable educational institution.

During the period from 1982-84, NCNM was essentially bankrupt; a Portland CPA, Jackie Babicky, played an important part in financially administering the school. Although Ms. Babicky would not answer directly when I probed about whether she represented NCNM or the creditors, she operated as if she had either the creditors’ interests or liability concerns for NCNM Board members uppermost in her mind. She certainly was not concerned about the College’s delivery of quality education during that period. During my last two and a half years at NCNM, there was little emphasis on education.

Decisions regarding who would be teaching classes from one term to the next were made based more upon who happened to be languishing in the halls of NCNM, willing to be there for the hourly fee offered, rather than upon whether the person was knowledgeable, a competent lecturer, or any other meaningful criterion. I was “taught” nutrition, public health and microbiology by a fellow student, Joel Wallach, supposedly a veterinarian, whose lack of preparation for teaching any of those classes was woefully apparent. I was taught Pharmacology by fellow-student Robert Sklovsky, a Pharm.D. who had not practiced pharmacy to any appreciable extent; he’d supposedly earned his degree at the University of Hawaii. I have no evidence that his credentials were inauthentic, but Dr. Sklovsky lacked basic knowledge of pharmacology and biochemistry. Classes in endocrinology and otorhinolaryngology were taught to the class of 1984 by members of the class of 1983 . . . from their class notes.

Ironically, concerns about accreditation actually contributed to the poor quality of education. Knowledgeable individuals were available to teach some of the above classes, but because other individuals possessed doctoral degrees which “looked good,” students were forced to tolerate inferior, and even impaired, instructors. For example, Pharmacognosy, which deals with the pharmacology of natural substances, was taught by a fellow who appeared to have disabling dependencies on some of the substances about which he spoke. The woman who taught microbiology and genetics to previous NCNM classes was unavailable to teach our class because her hallucinations and flight-of-ideas symptomatology rendered her completely incapable of functioning. At one point, she failed to report to teach her class; several days later, two young

men brought her to the College. They had picked her up hitch-hiking, and had extracted enough information from her garbled speech to drive her to NCNM.

Some of the people teaching and making administrative decisions were doing their best to be responsible, but, frankly, that is even more frightening than thinking that they were deliberately defrauding the students. I graduated with little confidence in my preparation to practice medicine; most of my knowledge of clinical medicine was gained outside the walls of NCNM. There are dozens of N.D.s who graduated between 1983-87 who don't realize how poorly-equipped they are to practice. I limit my assessment to 1983-87 because those are the classes that I know from first-hand observation were short-changed in their education's. I have almost no knowledge of NCNM activities since I graduated.

I took licensure examinations with the rest of my class in the Summer of 1984. The exams were obviously written piecemeal by practicing N.D.'s, and bore only occasional chance resemblance to our curricula. Questions on the exam ranged from irrelevant statistical questions to details about therapeutic modalities of highly-questionable effectiveness and safety. Our class went away from the exams with the impression that, certainly, all of us would fail to be licensed. The Oregon Board of Naturopathic Examiners (OBNE), however, did some "throwing out" of "bad" questions. I don't remember whether the process was explained to us completely, but I think that an effort was made to disregard questions which were missed by many of the examinees. Even after the manipulation of our test, all but one examinee had to re-take at least one test.

The one exam I was forced to repeat was orthopedics and neurology. I knew that I had missed more questions on other exams, (pediatrics, for example), than on the ortho/neuro test. However, I believe the results were skewed because I was likely to have missed the "flaky" questions my colleagues probably answered correctly, while my colleagues probably missed many of the conventional medicine questions that I was more likely to answer correctly . . . the "throwing out" of "most-missed" questions made a bad exam even worse. I mention the licensing process only to illustrate that the OBNE could not be relied upon, in 1984, to provide a reliable yardstick for measuring NCNM's educational effectiveness.

Attendance at NCNM was an unpleasant chapter in my life, a waste of time and money. Why did I stay until graduation? I believed in the fundamental philosophy, I kept hoping things would get better, that one day I'd find hard evidence to support some of the anecdotal information that was being spread haphazardly around the NCNM "community." I kept hoping the N.D.s would enjoy more respectability and legal recognition by the time I graduated, and that the incidences of irresponsible practices by N.D.s were declining, that perhaps my perception of the situation was inaccurate, and that my fellow students were right when they said, "Oh, Merry, you're just SO NEGATIVE. . . stop being such a VICTIM. . .," that my husband was right in saying, "You've come this far – you'll regret it if you quit now."

Since graduating and becoming licensed, I have elected not to practice naturopathic medicine. In order to augment my professional credibility, I completed an Associate Degree in Nursing at Portland Community College. I have worked as a registered nurse, but now am occupied in a retail computer software business.

I have no personal vendettas in operation and no financial considerations which relate to CNME's recognition or non-recognition as an accrediting agency. Dr. Donald Hayhurst, after I telephoned him to inform him that I believed that his concerns were valid, encouraged me to write to you. While I hope that your agency will act in a manner which foster the development of a responsible accrediting agency for naturopathic educational institutions, I urge caution in making decisions about who will bestow such accreditation. I want the profession to survive and grow, but I don't have any confidence that the quality of education has improved or will improve so long as the institutions are financially and ethically impoverished.

The naturopathic profession is replete with intelligent, articulate and sincere individuals who believe that they are furthering a noble cause. There are also some mediocre individuals who have chosen to dedicate their lives to resuscitating decayed, non-viable institutions. As I mentioned above, I have not been involved in NCNM activities since my graduation; it is possible that the College has made some meaningful changes in the interim, but some of the individuals in leadership positions are the same individuals who allowed the classed of '83 – 87 to be defrauded. People charged with evaluating the quality of naturopathic education should be capable of making informed, objective assessments. The interests of students and their future patients, rather than the survival of a corrupt institution, should be the CNME's primary concern.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any assistance to you.

Sincerely,
Merry L. Bern