

# NOVA MEDICAL GROUP— ALLOPATHIC PRACTICE IN VIRGINIA EXPANDS TO INTEGRATE CAM

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*Michael Scott, ND, MSA, LAc, joined Nova Medical Group in October 2003. He earned his undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, and received a doctorate degree in Naturopathic Medicine and a master of science degree in acupuncture from Bastyr University in Seattle, Wash. He is certified in naturopathic medicine by the Naturopathic Physicians Licensing Examination Board. He is also a licensed acupuncturist and is certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. In addition, Dr Scott is a member of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians.*

**Integrative Medicine:** When did you start your allopathic practice, and when and why did you decide to integrate complementary medicine?

**Dr Keenan:** I started Nova Medical Group in 1988. I just hung a sign and went to work. We grew as an internal medicine practice, and then we added family practice and subsequently opened 4 urgent care facilities. We now essentially dominate the urgent care market in Loudoun County and are the preeminent primary care practice. A couple of years ago, we brought on naturopathic physicians. We were being asked a lot of questions—questions about herbs, questions about alternatives to our standard allopathic

drugs, etc. I was spending a lot of my time saying, “I don’t know” to my patients, and realized we really needed this expertise and didn’t have it. I felt a great responsibility to make sure that patients got the correct information. People want to be aware of all of their options, and patients prefer to know what their naturopathic options are and communicate with their allopathic doctor. So it was really driven by a need to properly respond to patients’ requests.

**IM:** How is the practice structured?

**Dr Keenan:** We have 4 locations. At our main facility, our Ashburn location, we have urgent care, scheduled medical appointments, and medical spa services all under one roof. We are basically an allopathic primary care practice, but we have added the complementary medicine component (naturopathic and oriental medicine, acupuncture, massage, biofeedback, hypnotherapy, psychotherapy, hydrotherapy, and infrared detoxification protocols), as well as a fully operational spa (skin care, body treatments) to the list of options available to our patients. We have a combination of 13 MDs and DOs. We have 2 NDs, a clinical nurse specialist/cognitive behavioral therapist PhD, 3 massage therapists, 3 estheticians, several personal trainers, 11 nurse practitioners providing services from weight-loss counseling to urgent care and scheduling appointments, and we’re currently recruiting a new nutritionist/dietitian.

**IM:** How were you introduced to complementary medicine?

**Dr Keenan:** I have a 14-year-old, a 5-year-old, and 4-year-old twins. I went through a personal reproductive endocrinology nightmare. I spent many years with reproductive endocrinologists without much success and ended up cumulatively spending a year in bed. So I read a lot of information that I probably would have not otherwise read. This included reviewing an extensive complementary medicine update that Harvard has as part of its continuing medical education. This gave me an overview of complementary medicine.

I approached it with a fair amount of skepticism and bias; I really had it in my head that this was probably not very good stuff. But then, as is the case with ignorance, one

becomes educated and then sees and understands why it is of value. I saw that there were double-blind, randomized controlled studies; that this wasn't all unsubstantiated; that very believable, well-credentialed, qualified people were condoning the use of these practices.

*IM:* And you, Dr Scott? How were you introduced to complementary medicine?

**Dr Scott:** All of my life I have wanted to be a doctor. I grew up in Vancouver, British Columbia, and was heading toward medical school when I made a pretty sharp hairpin turn. I learned about Bastyr University in Seattle back in 1991. And being just a couple hours north, I drove down to visit the school. I learned that Bastyr offered this holistic medical program, and it just fed me immediately. It encompassed everything I wanted to do as a doctor. I have doctors and nurses in my family, but I was never convinced that I wanted to be that type of medical doctor. So I learned about Bastyr, and it was a no-brainer. It provided an evidence-based, scientific Western clinical education that is very similar to the education that any conventional medical student would receive in the United States. However, on top of that, students also learn a variety of other modalities and treatments and, more importantly, a different approach to patient care. The curriculum at Bastyr struck me as being an amazing and unique balance between strong Western clinical sciences, which allowed me to be that primary care doctor I wanted to be, as well as complementary modalities that I could use in place of or in conjunction with Western drugs and therapies.

*IM:* What is your approach to patient care?

**Dr Scott:** I try to practice with a relationship-centered, individual approach to each of my patients. There is no recipe book. We have to view each person as an individual, emotionally and spiritually, but also bio-chemically, functionally, and physiologically. I want my patients to know that I don't have an agenda for them. I want to be an open book, and I ask them to be an open book. I look at them as unique individuals and hopefully treat them as unique individuals. I might see 2 women the same day, both the same age, same lifestyle, and both with the diagnosis of fibromyalgia. Well, I'm probably not going to treat them identically, whereas a conventional medical doctor might treat them with the very same medications. There might be golden threads of similarity, nutritional recommendations, things like that, but I view them as unique women who need unique treatments. I also want to build a relationship with the patient and help the patient build a relationship with him- or herself. I want to increase their self-awareness, their self-empowerment, and their knowledge of the condition that they're dealing with.

*IM:* Would you consider the integration of complementary medicine at the Nova Medical Group a success?

**Dr Keenan:** Yes, absolutely. It is my opinion that this is a more intelligent way to approach healthcare. When we started, my bias was that people would come crawling back needing my drugs. I believed that maybe 15% to 20% would stick with the natural thing, but 80% would need my allopathic approach. I'd say it's more like 80% don't need my drugs, and 15% to 20% do. And that's good. I've been very impressed with the results of the naturopathic approach. If it's someone with high cholesterol who's trying a naturopathic treatment, I continue to follow the patient and keep an eye on their levels; and if they don't sustain proper levels, we'll put them back on our big drugs. But we rarely need to.

I think this approach is very comprehensive. We are better able to answer the why's of things. One of the shortcomings of allopathic medicine is that the practitioners often can't explain why—"I don't know why you've got it, but here's the drug for it." In contrast, complementary practitioners spend more time on the why of illness and focus on prevention. Instead of waiting to treat people when they are sick, we intervene with multiple therapies, including lifestyle changes.

*IM:* Dr Scott, same question—do you have any thoughts on why the Nova Medical Group is a success?

**Dr Scott:** It's been a really good fit. I joined this medical group because I've always wanted to integrate. I've always wanted to, in some way, be a forerunner for integrative interaction, both with patients and doctors. I was always keenly aware that there was a need for it in society, that there was a great lack of true integration. I've always wanted to be in an integrative setting because it's very dynamic medically. I can learn a lot from allopathic doctors, and I like to teach and share what I've learned with them. I really get that here. There's a real openness to what I do as a naturopathic physician, a willingness to learn, a desire to truly provide patients with the best care, the best medicine. You know, it makes sense to try nutritional interventions and supplements before you prescribe the Lipitor, etc, and patients have the opportunity to select these treatments while remaining under the care of their primary-care physicians.

*IM:* What is the financial model of your clinic?

**Dr Keenan:** Our revenue sources come mostly from patient care, from our consultation fees, selling supplements, and business that goes to the spa. We don't have any outside funding. We have not covered the start-up costs of the naturopathic practice or the spa, but we just opened the spa

in January. We are happy with our progress; our revenue is growing about 20% per month. I suspect for the spa it's going to be another 6 months before we break even. We're already covering our naturopaths' salaries and their direct overhead. I am not an accountant, but considering the depth and value this adds to our traditional practice and the growth that we have seen, I consider this a huge success for our group and our patients.

**IM:** What have been your greatest challenges?

**Dr Keenan:** This integrative, complementary approach was not what we were taught in medical school. A lot of what we were taught perhaps wasn't the right thing, or the most optimal thing. So I think the first challenge for an MD is to come to terms with that, making this idea of "self-care" central to the healthcare process, rather than drugs and surgery. Secondly, I think that finding someone who is really ideal for the practice is difficult. For the naturopath, coming into an environment that is totally allopathic is lonely, so he or she needs to kind of ride out the storm. Anyone too fixated on any ideological concept could blow it. There's got to be a place where we meet halfway. The most important thing you can do is take good care of the patient and not let your ego get in the way of that. People have to be dedicated to a long-term vision, and I think we have that. I think that's been a key part of our success. This integrative approach has allowed us to develop signature programs that unite our allopathic and naturopathic approaches to treat fibromyalgia, obesity, and stress management, and has influenced our newly created executive-wellness program.

**Dr Scott:** The greatest challenge for me is probably the lack of licensure in Virginia. It limits my scope of practice to some degree in that I can't prescribe things I would be able to prescribe in Washington state. But I work with MDs, internists, and family nurse practitioners, and they're able to help with those aspects of my care. I will refer a patient to other doctors here with a recommendation for a medication, referral, or imaging, and that doctor will then see the patient and write the referral. Insurance—there's another challenge. There's no insurance coverage for most naturopathic services here, so everything is out of pocket. That's a hurdle for a lot of people who can't afford to see me and who dearly need to see me. We're working to change that, however. We have a state association in Virginia, and we will be putting a bill together to first get the state licensed, and hopefully insurance for naturopathic care will stem from that. ■■