

# The Legacy of Sebastian Kneipp: Linking Wellness, Naturopathic, and Allopathic Medicine

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## Abstract

Sebastian Kneipp (1821–1897) is seen as a vital link between the European nature cure movement of the 19th century and American naturopathy. He promoted a holistic treatment concept founded on five pillars: hydro- and phytotherapy, exercise, balanced nutrition, and regulative therapy. Kneipp attempted to bridge the gap with allopathic medicine, and many modern treatments that are based on his methods indeed blend wellness elements with naturopathic medicine and biomedicine. Because Kneipp's approach to health and healing today are mainly covered in German literature, this paper aims to provide a broader international audience with insights into his life and his treatment methods and to highlight the profound influence Kneipp has had to this day on natural and preventive medicine. The paper emphasizes in particular the continued popularity of Kneipp's holistic approach to health and well-being, which is evident in the many national and international Kneipp Associations, the globally operating *Kneipp Werke*, postgraduate qualifications in his treatment methods, and the existence of more than 60 accredited Kneipp spas and health resorts in Germany alone.

## Introduction

SEBASTIAN KNEIPP, BORN IN Stephansried, Germany, in 1821 into a poor family of weavers, was a pioneer of the European nature cure movement, which inspired naturopathy in the United States and provided the foundations for modern naturopathic medicine.<sup>1–3</sup> In his time Kneipp was a celebrity: He was voted in the United States among the best-known people (running third only after the US president and the German chancellor Bismarck). He treated up to 200 patients a day, and his first book, *My Water Cure*,<sup>4</sup> has since been published in more than 100 editions and has been translated into 14 languages.<sup>2</sup> Kneipp also travelled extensively throughout Europe; it is estimated that around 1 million people listened to Kneipp's lectures given during 1 of the 32 tours he undertook between 1890 and 1896.<sup>5</sup>

Even after his death in 1897, his holistic approach to health and healing continued to thrive. Organized in various confederations, associations, and institutions across 40 countries under the umbrella of Kneipp Worldwide, the Kneipp movement, with its 170,000 members (Kneipp Bund. Personal communication. August 2013), constitutes one of the largest noncommercial global health promotion organizations. Perhaps the most visible legacy of Kneipp's philosophy in the 21st century is the continued practice of offering his holistic therapy concept (known as *Kneipp Kur*)

in hundreds of accredited Kneipp spas and health resorts across Europe. In Germany, for example, the “Kneipp Cure” was recognized in 1953 as a legitimate form of rehabilitation therapy reimbursable through the country's public health insurance fund and has remained so, albeit to a lesser extent, to this day.<sup>6</sup>

In this light, it is surprising that Kneipp's holistic approach to health and healing, as well as the popularity his teachings still enjoy to this day in many countries in continental Europe, appears to be little known in the English-speaking world. On the basis of a detailed analysis of primary and secondary data sources, this paper aims to provide interesting insights into Kneipp's life and his healing philosophy and to highlight the profound influence he has had on natural and preventive medicine.

## Kneipp's Life and His Teachings

Kneipp's healing methods had their origin in a series of hydrotherapeutic self-experiments. In 1849, after commencing his theological studies, he suffered badly from pulmonary tuberculosis and had been given up on by conventional medicine. Being a prolific reader and convinced of the body's self-healing powers, he drew inspiration from a book on the healing powers of water that had been published by Sigmund Hahn nearly a century earlier,<sup>1,2</sup> Having

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strengthened his immune system through cold water treatments, he was eventually ordained as a priest in 1852 with fully restored health and was assigned to the small, impoverished, and remote Bavarian parish of Wörishofen in 1852; there he continued to experiment with a range of preventive and curative water treatments on himself and a growing number of patients.<sup>3,7</sup> His approach was inspired by that of Vincenz Priessnitz (1799–1851), a famous Austrian nature cure proponent of the 19th century, who is often referred to as the “Father of Hydrotherapy.”<sup>2</sup>

But over time Kneipp refined Priessnitz’ cold water treatments, in particular by making them more gentle through a much-reduced treatment time, and complemented them with other hydrotherapeutic practices, which soon became a hallmark of his treatment regimen. Kneipp’s approach to health and healing was also more complex than that of Priessnitz as he added another four elements to his refined hydrotherapeutic treatments: the complementary use of medicinal herbs, physical exercises and different forms of massage, healthy and balanced nutrition, and regulative therapy to seek inner balance. Kneipp’s therapy therefore reflects a paradigm shift away from an almost exclusive focus on physical aspects to an understanding of health that the World Health Organization about a century later defined as “state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”<sup>8</sup> In doing so, Kneipp also moved away from the image of passive patients and in turn promoted the active involvement in their therapy. Known as the “five pillars,” the different elements of Kneipp’s treatment concept are discussed in more detail in the following section.

#### Hydrotherapy

Kneipp considered the cold water treatments promoted by earlier hydrotherapists as often “too violent or too frequent” and was concerned about their potential negative physical and/or emotional effects.<sup>4</sup> Typical elements of his more gentle approach were water treading, hot and cold half-baths and full baths, contrast baths, steaming treatments, wraps and compresses, and, most important, the brief cold gush to different body parts.<sup>2,7,9</sup> These techniques were constantly refined and described in detail in his immensely popular book *My Water Cure*.<sup>4</sup> Today, there is a growing body of clinical evidence for the complex processes that underpin successful hydrotherapeutic treatments, which are outlined in more detail later. For Kneipp, however, water simply served the purpose of dissolving and removing toxins, stimulating circulation, and strengthening a patient’s constitution.<sup>4</sup> This oversimplified perspective reflects in part the time of his teachings and the fact that Kneipp had no formal medical training. It might, however, also help explain his enormous popularity amongst the general public, who found his “almost childish simplicity...of language” without “incomprehensible medicinal phrases,” as the translator of his books describes it,<sup>4</sup> very appealing.

#### Phytotherapy

In particular, his use of medicinal herbs, externally in the form of bath additives and internally as teas, powders, and tinctures, made Kneipp the first to introduce these treatments into the nature cure movement. Although some of his fellow nature cure proponents were critical of this “herb cure,” fearing that it could be seen as a vote of mistrust against the

healing powers of water,<sup>4</sup> today it is considered one of Kneipp’s significant contributions to naturopathic medicine.<sup>2</sup> To this day, herbal Kneipp products are still manufactured and distributed by Kneipp International, a global company with headquarter in Würzburg, Germany, and more than 30 branches worldwide.<sup>10</sup> Trained in the use of medicinal plants by his mother, an experienced herbalist,<sup>2</sup> Kneipp considered the promotion of simple herbal remedies a very useful way of providing the poor with easily accessible, yet effective, basic treatments. In *My Water Cure*, he emphasized:

No expensive stock-in-trade will be found here, for most of my medicines, infusions, extracts, oils, and powders are drawn from simple weeds and herbs, well known and much prized by our ancestors, but mostly now forgotten and despised. These may be found in almost every field and garden, on the common, and by the wayside; and as this little work is chiefly written for the poor, the greatest merit of my remedies lies in their very cheapness and vulgarity.<sup>4</sup>

Kneipp’s consideration of and care for the underprivileged is well documented. Although he is reported to have successfully treated some prominent members of the high society of his time, such as Pope Leo XIII, he mainly cared for the poor, offering his treatments free of charge.<sup>2</sup> He also opened a children’s asylum (*Kinderheilstätte*) and the foundations *Sebastianum* and *Kneippianum*, which are still in operation and offer Kneipp treatments in his hometown of Bad Wörishofen.

#### Exercise

In line with his promotion of an “active” patient, physical exercise was part of Kneipp’s various hydrotherapeutic treatments (e.g., treading in cold water), but he also advocated brisk walks, home callisthenics, and other moderately intense physical activities on a daily basis “to make the joints more supple and the muscles stronger.”<sup>11</sup> He placed a particular emphasis on the strenuous aspect of these activities and in doing so set them clearly apart from the popular “promenading” of his time.<sup>12</sup> Today, in light of a broad social acceptance of sport and other outdoor leisure activities, these recommendations seem far from being farfetched, but Kneipp also highlighted the importance of hardening, in particular the feet, to different surfaces and temperatures. Consequently, patients walking in the early mornings barefoot around the dewy fields of Wörishofen, through freshly fallen snow or cold water and on wet stones,<sup>13</sup> must have been and still is an extraordinary sight.

#### Nutrition

Kneipp was not an advocate of an ascetic lifestyle. Rather, he emphasized the importance of “varied and simple,” balanced nutrition and moderation in eating habits.<sup>11</sup> He was not in favor of a vegetarian diet and recommended, if at all, only occasional caffeine and alcohol intake in very moderate quantities. He was also an outspoken advocate of the use of simple, wholesome food and green vegetables and unrefined flour.<sup>11,12</sup> In Norway to this day, Kneipp bread (*Kneippbrød*) still enjoys enormous popularity, the whole-meal-based recipe having been brought to the country more than a century ago by a Norwegian who had been treated by Kneipp. A succinct summary of Kneipp’s attitude toward nutrition can be found in a rather detailed chapter in his book, titled “Thus Shalt Thou Live,” where he states:

It is not the quantity of food that makes man strong and healthy. What we must do is to choose good food, then a small portion at a time will be sufficient. We must further be careful that nature should be able to digest well what we give it and nothing should be eaten and drunk from which nature is not likely to draw any advantages.<sup>12</sup>

Although none of Kneipp's nutritional recommendations seem exceptional from today's point of view, they illustrate his sound understanding of dietary requirements and the importance of balanced nutrition for general health and well-being at a time when processed and refined foods came strongly into fashion and were often consumed in large quantities to display personal wealth.

#### *Regulative therapy*

While each of the individual pillars of his approach was acknowledged for its contribution to health and well-being, it was their combination and a general inner balance that in Kneipp's view made a healthy person. "This beautiful harmony and order, which we call health," he remarked,<sup>4</sup> "may be upset and disturbed by various interruptions, which we designate by the name of illness." Moving away from a purely biomedical toward a more wellness-oriented health paradigm and a focus on long-term health promotion, including individual self-healing and self-care,<sup>13</sup> Kneipp stressed the importance of balance for the health and well-being of a person, be it with respect to an appropriate work-life balance, the right daily mix between physical and mental exercise and relaxation, or adherence to the natural biological rhythm. Because Kneipp was a key figure in the European nature cure movement, living in harmony with nature was an important element of his teachings. Although his simple instructions<sup>12</sup> for the best way of living, cooking and eating, lodging, sleeping and dressing, for example, might feel rather patronizing today, the underlying message strikes a chord at a time when a growing number of people long for a more balanced and slower-paced life in harmony with nature.

#### **Kneipp's Legacy**

With his holistic view on health and wellbeing, Kneipp already foreshadowed what today is seen by many as the most appropriate definition of health, namely "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."<sup>8</sup> His acknowledgment of an emotional and spiritual dimension to health resonates strongly in modern approaches to complementary and alternative medicine. Similarly, Kneipp was an outspoken advocate of treatments that were tailored to an individual's particular circumstances. He emphasised<sup>4</sup> that "[t]o discriminate, therefore, which applications are adapted to the disease in question, and furthermore to determine how these are to be varied according to the constitution of the patient, is the touchstone of the true physician" and "[t]o each new patient who comes to consult me I address certain questions, in order to avoid the danger of prescribing hastily and without sufficient knowledge."

Although Kneipp emphasized that he had no intention to "enter a competition with the scientific art of healing,"<sup>12</sup> he faced strong resistance from the professional medical community. While Kneipp stressed the importance of a tailored treatment regimen, he was unable to devote a lot of time to personal interactions with his patients. Most likely

this was a result of Kneipp's enormous popularity as "[t]he sick came in such numbers that we knew not what to do with them."<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, what was seen by some as a hastily "dispatching" of 30 or 40 patients per hour and the absence of proper patient records attracted strong criticism from the medical profession. They also criticized, for example, that he did not even attempt a diagnosis.<sup>15</sup> Because he had developed his therapeutic approach on the basis of observation, reading about other naturopathic health practices and his own practical experience but never had any medical training, the majority of allopathic medical professionals were very skeptical toward his methods and accused him of profiteering and being a *Kurpfuscher* (quack or charlatan).

#### *Kneipp organizations*

When physicians increasingly stirred up hostility against him in the light of his rising fame, Kneipp employed doctors to attend all his consultations for libel protection but also to stimulate research on his methods. About 150 allopathic physicians travelled to Wörishofen every year to experience and study the *Kneipp Kur*.<sup>16</sup> In Kirchfeld and Boyle's view,<sup>2</sup> Kneipp's attempt to bridge the gap with biomedicine was very successful because "no other lay healer attracted as many followers from the ranks of the medical profession." Consequently, in 1894 a number of physicians founded the International Society of Kneipp Physicians to provide professional training in Kneipp's methods,<sup>16</sup> following the launch of the Kneipp Association by former patients in 1890. Shortly after Kneipp's death in 1897, the establishment of the *Kneipp Bund* provided an umbrella organization for the exchange and collaboration of the 45 associations that had been launched since. To date, the organization coordinates 600 German Kneipp Associations and has also grown internationally into Kneipp Worldwide, with representations from 40 different countries.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the International Society of Kneipp Physicians today counts about 1000 members (Ärztegesellschaft für Präventionsmedizin und klassische Naturheilverfahren, Kneippärztebund. Personal communication. October 2013) and offers a range of postgraduate qualifications in Kneipp and other naturopathic methods.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Kneipp Kur*

Many had predicted that because of Kneipp's charismatic personality, the popularity of his treatments would quickly wane after his death; instead, naturopathic methods, such as hydrotherapy and the Kneipp approach, were gradually incorporated into mainstream medicine. In the 1880s under the German chancellor Bismarck, prevention and health promotion and also natural healing methods had already become politically more accepted, which paved the way for the development of the *Kurwesen*, a "German institution which most distinctly reflects therapeutic pluralism and the continuation of naturopathic healing principles in medicine."<sup>18</sup> Evident, for example, in Baden-Baden, Germany, and other famous, elegant, and luxurious European health resorts, the *Kur* in the past was "a social institution for the privileged class to combine health concerns with pleasure in an exclusive resort."<sup>18</sup> But today, the term refers to specific medical prevention and convalescence, as well as rehabilitation programs for a range of mainly chronic diseases (e.g., certain pediatric, psychological, dermatologic,

rheumatoid, musculoskeletal, or respiratory conditions), that are offered in accredited spa and health resorts. These are carried out by highly qualified health professionals, including so-called *Kurärzte* (spa physicians) who have obtained additional qualifications in balneology and medicinal climatology.<sup>19</sup> In Germany, costs for these *Kur* treatments can be privately met or, since 1953, can be covered by various health insurance funds when recommended and prescribed by a physician.<sup>19</sup> In the light of growing financial pressures on the country's health insurance system, the *Kur* has, however, been targeted over the past two decades as an area where public spending should be significantly reduced; this caused considerable challenges for Germany's accredited spas and health resorts after decades of enormous growth.<sup>6</sup>

Today, the *Deutscher Heilbäderverband* (German Spa Association) oversees the accreditation of towns to become officially recognized German *Kurorte* (health resorts and spa towns), which are easily identified by the prefix *Bad* ("bath"). These towns, which have to meet strict quality standards, can be classified as mineral, thermal and mud spa resorts; climate health resorts; seaside spas and resorts; health resorts with medical tunnel and radon therapy; and also as Kneipp health resorts.<sup>20</sup> The latter are different from those in the other categories as their accreditation is not based on the availability of certain local characteristics, such as a favorable climate, clean air, mineral waters, or moor mud. Rather, they are certified as *Kneipp Kurort* for offering a whole range of therapies based on the five pillars of Kneipp's therapeutic approach.

The *Kneipp Kur*, prescribed by an allopathic physician, potentially paid for by public health insurance and supervised by a specially trained spa physician, can thus be seen as step toward integrative medicine, the vision of a "combination of mainstream medicine and CAM [complementary and alternative medicine] on a scientific basis."<sup>21</sup> The best-known *Kneipp Kurort* is Wörishofen, Kneipp's parish of 42 years, where he developed and practiced his treatments. As one of the earliest towns, Wörishofen was officially accredited as a spa town and awarded *Kurort* status; thus, in 1920, it was renamed Bad Wörishofen.<sup>22</sup> Today, it is 1 of about 60 *Kneipp Kurorte* among the more than 350 officially accredited spas and health resorts in Germany.<sup>23</sup> A large number of destinations offer Kneipp treatments in Austria, Switzerland, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia.<sup>24–28</sup>

### Naturopathic medicine

Although his impact has not been as pronounced in the United States as in Germany and continental Europe, another important legacy of Sebastian Kneipp is undoubtedly his influence on the development of the naturopathic movement in the United States in the early 20th century. Benedict Lust (1872–1945), who in 1901 founded the Naturopathic Society of America (later renamed American Naturopathic Association), was successfully treated by Kneipp, according to historic accounts, from tuberculosis after he had also been given up on, like Kneipp nearly half a century earlier, by conventional medicine. He then returned to the United States in 1896 "to spread the Gospel of the Water Cure" beyond the country's German immigrant population.<sup>3</sup> He added other nature cure therapies, such as massage and sunbathing, os-

teopathy and chiropractic, homeopathy, and manipulative therapy to Kneipp's treatment methods. Over the decades and after some tumultuous years, the concept of naturopathic medicine eventually matured from these beginnings.<sup>3,29</sup>

### The Way Ahead

To this day, naturopathic healing methods, including Kneipp treatments like the *Kneipp Kur*, have retained a strong position in Germany (and other European countries). However, many allopathic health professionals still doubt the effectiveness of any type of *Kur*. In the light of mounting financial pressure on the country's health insurance systems, has added weight to the political demand of recent years to cut back the involvement of the state in the *Kurwesen*.<sup>6,22</sup> At the same time, there have been calls for a stronger evidence base (e.g., efficacy) and for more cost-benefit analyses for *Kur* treatments to meet the requirements of a health care system dominated by the biomedical paradigm.<sup>18</sup>

To this end, although rarely designated as specific Kneipp applications, there are indeed many scientific studies reporting the effectiveness of hydrotherapeutic methods. They are, for example, documented to be effective in a range of medical conditions, spanning from anxiety disorders,<sup>30</sup> chronic pain,<sup>31</sup> back pain,<sup>32,33</sup> Guillain-Barré syndrome,<sup>34</sup> osteoarthritis,<sup>35,36</sup> fibromyalgia,<sup>37</sup> and ankylosing spondylitis<sup>38</sup> to cardiovascular conditions.<sup>39,40</sup> Hydrotherapy has also been successfully used in the improvement of geriatric cognitive brain function,<sup>41</sup> for athletic recovery,<sup>42</sup> and after hip and knee replacement.<sup>43,44</sup> However, there is no Cochrane Collaboration-level evidence for any of these treatments; this might also reflect the difficulties in assessing naturopathic treatments, such as hydrotherapy and other aspects of the Kneipp approach, under a biomedical paradigm.

In *My Water Cure*,<sup>4</sup> Kneipp listed more than 40 different medicinal plants that he had studied and found to be safe and effective in self-experiments. These plants, which could simply and cheaply be prepared into tinctures and extracts, teas, or powders, constitute the phytomedicinal pillar of the Kneipp philosophy. He gave detailed instructions on their preparation into herbal remedies and on their correct storage in an effort to provide the poor in particular with their own household pharmacy. Many of these medicinal plants are still popular today, although advancements in pharmacognosy research over the past 120 years have led to a much better understanding of their active principles, pharmacologic profile, and mechanism of action. Kneipp recommended St. John's wort tea, for example, as a liver and kidney cleanser and to treat bed wetting, and valued valerian root tea or powder for the treatment of headaches and as a carminative. While the applications of these and other plants differ strongly from their modern use, it is nonetheless telling of Kneipp's sound herbalist knowledge that most of the herbal remedies in his household pharmacy are still popular medicinal plants today. For many of them, evidence of their safety and efficacy is demonstrated in favorable Cochrane Collaboration reviews (e.g., for St. John's wort) or "positive monographs" (e.g., for stinging nettle, arnica, and valerian) awarded for a favorable risk-benefit profile by Commission E, an internationally highly regarded advisory board to the German Federal Health Office.<sup>45,46</sup>

Despite the above briefly mentioned contributions toward a stronger evidence base for Kneipp's methods, in particular

in the hydrotherapy and phytotherapy areas, the interplay of the five pillars to his teachings—in other words, his holistic approach to health and healing—has not been subjected to a lot of model fit scientific scrutiny. Advocates of Kneipp's philosophy argue that an assessment under a biomedical health paradigm would in any case be the wrong approach as the benefits of a holistic treatment regimen that not only targets physical symptoms but also aims for inner balance cannot be fully appreciated and accounted for in this way. Nonetheless, for nearly 40 years now the *Kneipp Stiftung* (Kneipp Foundation) has supported scientific studies that investigate the basis of Kneipp's empirical approach and seek to provide data on its effectiveness, in particular the interplay of his phytochemical methods with other elements of his teachings. To date, more than 50 studies have been funded under this scheme and thus continue what Sebastian Kneipp already initiated during his lifetime: a much closer collaboration with the scientific community.<sup>47</sup>

Possibly as a result of the mounting financial pressures on health care systems and their effects, for instance, on the public funding of *Kneipp Kur* treatments, as well as the challenges inherent in providing scientific biomedical evidence for efficacy and cost-effectiveness, the various Kneipp products and treatments today appear to fall mainly into the alternative medicines sphere. While the *Kneipp Kur* initially mainly targeted sick patients with various acute and chronic diseases, most of Kneipp's methods can indeed be applied as health promotion measures and thus go well with a growing wellness trend in many countries.<sup>22</sup> This is also well demonstrated in the product range of Kneipp International, a company that has its roots in the contractual arrangements made in 1891 between Sebastian Kneipp and his friend the pharmacist Leonhard Oberhäußer, who was given the exclusive rights to promote the formulas the two keen advocates of naturopathic remedies had jointly developed.<sup>10</sup> Today the Kneipp Group offers more than 200 different phytomedicines, nutritional supplements, and body care and bath products. Many of them strongly promote a wellness theme, their marketing evoking images a far cry from the often harsh hydrotherapeutic treatments, such as cold water gushes, prescribed by Kneipp. Rather, they appear to reinforce Kneipp's holistic approach to health and his emphasis on inner balance. In fact, many of his treatments are intrinsically pleasurable or can be made enjoyable and are thus very well suited to a wellness experience.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

So what relevance do Kneipp's teachings have in the 21st century? With his holistic understanding of health, his consideration of not only the physical but also the emotional aspects of diseases, and his promotion of hydrotherapy and phytomedicine, Kneipp laid the foundations for modern naturopathy. This holistic view meets the current needs and expectations of many who seek more for their physical and emotional well-being than what biomedicine has to offer. It is therefore no surprise that the Kneipp brand continues to thrive. Perhaps the most visible legacy of Kneipp's philosophy is the continued practice of offering his therapy concept, the *Kneipp Kur*, to "tourist-patients" in a large number of spas and health resorts, particularly in German-speaking countries. In 2012, for example, more than 2.2 million

people visited German Kneipp spas and health resorts, spending a total of more than 10 million guest nights there.<sup>48</sup> While not all of these visitors would have participated in a full *Kneipp Kur* program, there would have been ample opportunities for them to experience at least some of the many facets to Kneipp's teachings, be it by attending lifestyle seminars, consulting resident spa physicians or qualified nutritionists, participating in water-based exercises or relaxation therapies, carrying out Kneipp water applications, or undertaking self-guided walks barefoot.<sup>22</sup>

Providing more information on the five pillars of his healing philosophy, insights into his life, and a broader discussion of the significant influence he has had to this day on the development of alternative medicines, this paper has highlighted the continued relevance of Kneipp's holistic approach to health and well-being in the 21st century, beyond German-speaking countries. It is hoped that it will also stimulate further research into this, not only from a historical but also contemporary standpoint, very important element of naturopathic medicine.

## Author Disclosure Statement

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