

SUMMER 2008

VAIL VALLEY

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Miracles in the mountains

Next Step Institute of Integrative Medicine

She's a young woman, certainly too young to look so frail and walk with such obvious pain. He's a prominent attorney and an elite athlete, with a meticulously trained body and a winning smile, but with eyes that speak of weariness and years of stress. They are a family terrorized by the diagnosis of terminal cancer, looking for a miracle.

These are all people who travel to Vail, for something more precious than glorious skiing, magnificent scenery and fabulous cuisine. They come for a new lease on life at Next Step Institute of Integrative Medicine. They are seeking a different type of health care, where cutting-edge modern medical testing and treatment are integrated with a

wide range of holistic therapies derived from Native American traditions, Eastern or Chinese medicine, holistic nutrition, naturopathy and emotional and spiritual healing.

They may find what they are seeking in a Sweat Lodge ceremony, a Chi Kung energy healing, acupuncture, art therapy, Pilates, massage, yoga, physical therapy, an herbal

brew, a new food plan, an alpine hike, meditation, psychotherapy, laughter and relaxation, equine-assisted therapy, or most likely, a combination of a few or all of these approaches.

Most of all, these patients will find doctors and therapists who will truly listen to their histories, their fears and their hopes. They will find physicians who will listen with their hearts as well as their minds, and who will devote all the time needed to fully understand their problems, and prescribe individual plans of assessment and treatment, utilizing every possible approach appropriate for that particular patient and his or her family.

"My doctor at home is a good doctor, but he only has about five minutes to spend in each visit, so I tell him that my pain is about

the same, and he gives me my prescription, and I'm on my way," Cheryl, a Fibromyalgia patient from California, reports. "No one has ever taken the time to look at what's hiding beneath the pain."

Treating causes rather than just medicating symptoms, and uncovering contributing factors to illness are major components of integrative medicine. "We also specialize in the prevention of disease," said Dr. Gary Weiss, a medical director at the Institute, "but our emphasis is on optimal wellness and happiness rather than just the avoidance of illness and misery."

Many patients who come to Next Step Institute have been coping with serious illness or chronic pain, but others are concerned that their stressful lifestyles, unhealthy eating habits, or unresolved emotional issues could lead to health problems.

"We believe wellness is physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual," Dr. Weiss said. "Balance among all those elements of the human being is what constitutes a healthy person." Dr. Weiss, a Mayo Clinic-trained physician who specializes in neurology, diagnostic medicine and integrative medicine, believes that modern medicine has moved too far away from the ancient healing powers of hope and faith.

Even individuals with conditions that are considered "incurable" or "terminal" can find healing with this approach, according to Dr. Weiss. "Sometimes we see physical healing and an extension of life," he said, "and sometimes we see healing on other levels that allows a much more joyful quality of life."

Next Step is a non-profit institute founded 25 years ago in San Diego with the mission of creating innovative programs to respond to unmet health and education needs. Next Step has consulted with hospitals, school districts, government, religious and charitable organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada. The Institute established a state-of-the-art chronic pain and chronic illness program in Palm Bay, Florida, nearly two decades ago.

"Our Vail program is the culmination of all those years of knowledge and experience," Program Director Bonnie McDonald said. "We have researched the vast range of

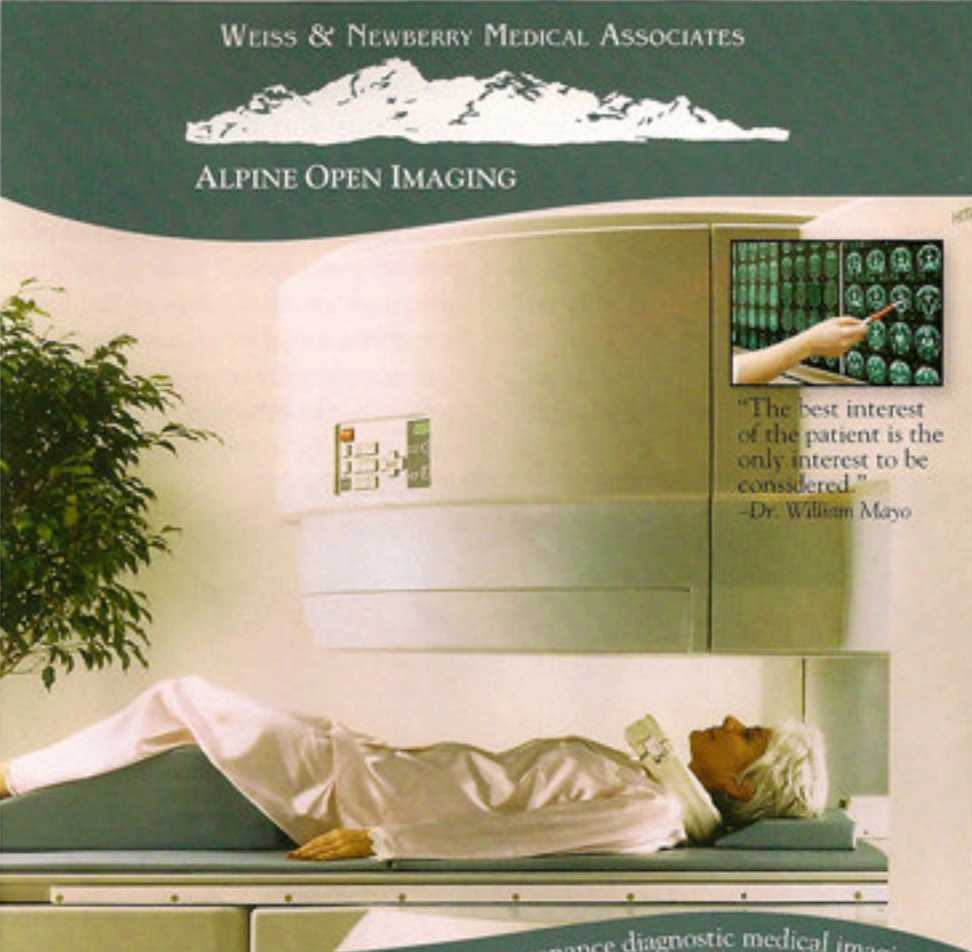
holistic and more conventional medical approaches, and we have chosen the most effective, and least invasive, to offer our patients in Vail."

Next Step Institute's clinical offices are in East Vail. Patient lodging, as well as equine-assisted therapy, the Native American healing center and other holistic treatments

are offered at the organization's Two Thunderbirds Ranch in Eagle.

Patients typically stay for six nights and five days while attending one of Next Step's "Wellness Week" programs. These weeks are planned for just five patients at a time, all of whom are experiencing very similar life or health challenges. Some of the

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upcoming Wellness Weeks themes include cancer recovery, conquering chronic pain, living well with multiple sclerosis and headache relief. There are also special weeks for individuals, couples and families ready to work on reducing stress and improving relationships.

"We have a very talented team of clinicians and therapists who are eager to take on challenges," says McDonald. "I always encourage people to tell us what they need, and if we don't already have one established, we will create a program specifically for them."

Despite the growing demand for a more holistic approach to healthcare, there are only a few other comprehensive integrative medicine programs in the country. What sets Next Step apart from even these select programs is the truly individualized treatment each patient receives. "Our staff to patient ratio is incredible," McDonald said. "We have about 20 doctors and therapists

for five patients. Each patient consults with a doctor each day, for a total of 10 hours during the five days."

Patients' records and histories, as well as questionnaires and health logs filled out before arriving in Vail, are carefully reviewed by the clinical directors prior to the initial exams and assessments. Sometimes additional medical testing is indicated. The Next Step medical team are diagnostic experts who utilize the most sophisticated labs and testing facilities, including the Mayo Clinic as well as the new Alpine Open Imaging, an open MRI center located in Eagle, designed for the comfort of even the most anxious or claustrophobic patient.

Far from the coldly impersonal environments of most medical facilities, Next Step offers a relaxed, warm elegance surrounded by inspiring waterfalls and mountain peaks, while providing the very best of professional care with old-fashioned kindness. Each

Next Step clinician has been selected because of recognized excellence and leadership in his or her specialty or field, as well as demonstrated commitment to each and every patient's optimal wellness.

The concept of "optimal wellness" is central to Next Step's philosophy. It means that even when life presents burdens or health challenges that seem truly insurmountable, we still have the opportunity to live our best lives, to grow and evolve into our best selves, and to enjoy the greatest state of wellness we can achieve within the limits of our conditions.

This philosophy is attracting Vail Valley locals to Next Step for their healthcare needs. Patients can choose an abbreviated version of the Wellness Weeks by scheduling a Day of Wellness, where an integrative medicine consultation will lead to a selection of treatments designed to meet a patient's specific needs or interests. Other locals choose the Next Step Options pro-



Patient lodge, Two Thunderbirds Ranch in Eagle



Creative therapy helps a patient to deal with multiple sclerosis.

them to be completely focused on their physical problems," Dr. Newberry said. "When we begin to gently explore their childhood histories, we discover that there are emotional wounds of abuse or neglect, and these wounds have never been healed. When we tend to the emotional pain, the physical pain becomes bearable. In some ways, the physical pain was expressing the emotional pain."

The mind-body connection in pain and illness is often misunderstood. Some patients, their families and their physicians might imply that the problem "is all in your head." In nearly all cases, the problem is very definitely real on a physical level, but the suffering associated with the problem can be reduced by addressing the emotional issues. We all know stress can aggravate medical problems. A significant loss or trauma, if not addressed on a spiritual and emotional level, might surface many years later in exacerbation of chronic illness or pain.

Another unique aspect of Next Step

Institute is its understanding of addiction as a major coping, or "survival" technique for those who experience life as a painful struggle. Many people turn to alcohol, other prescription and recreational drugs, tobacco, food, starving, sex, spending, excessive work, exercise, gambling and other compulsive behaviors as a way to numb emotional pain, and fill spiritual

program, where, after an integrative medicine assessment, a patient may receive one or many of the healing therapies available.

The most comprehensive program available is the "24/7" year-long program, which gives patients immediate access to integrative medicine specialists at any time as well as complete health assessment and monitoring, with assistance in making connections with outside professionals and institutions should the need arise. In addition, "24/7" patients receive significant discounts on Next Step therapies.

"I just like the idea of having a doctor and a team who really know me, know about my life, and keep track of what medicines and supplements I'm taking, what tests I'm due for, all of that," said Cornelia, a part-time Vail resident. "Most of all, I like knowing that they really care about what happens in my life, and what has happened to me that could affect my health today."

Many Next Step patients learn that what has happened to them in the past — particularly difficult childhood experiences — do indeed affect their health today. Dr. Michael Newberry, a Next Step medical director, is a psychiatrist with additional certification in addiction medicine and pain management.

"So often we see patients who are in unbearable physical pain which has caused

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A sacred ceremony held inside a "sweat lodge" was a traditional means of healing used by some early American tribes.

voids. When these behaviors turn addictive, they create a new set of problems, which then must be "medicated" with more addictive behavior.

"This cycle can destroy a life, a career, a family relatively quickly," Dr. Newberry said. While Next Step Institute does not offer in-patient hospitalization for detox or acute addiction treatment, it does provide Wellness Weeks and ongoing programs for patients who have begun their recovery from addiction, but are seeking a more balanced life to sustain long-term freedom and wellness.

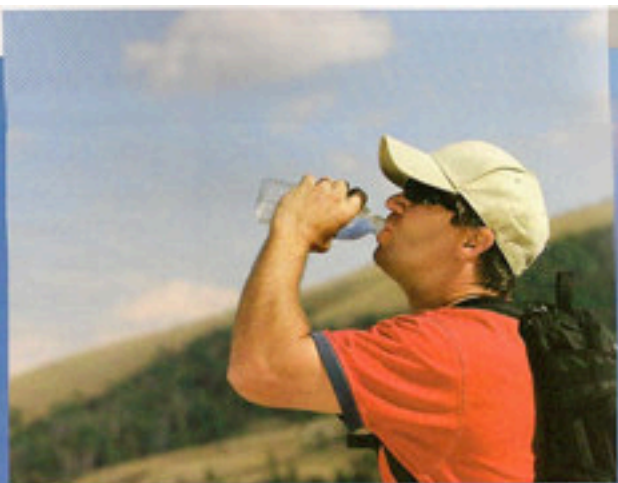
A team of Next Step therapists specialize in family dysfunction and childhood issues, such as growing up with alcoholic parents, and their lasting impact on the quality of life and relationships. All of this is provided within the comprehensive framework of overall wellness.

"We find if we treat just one aspect of a person — say his headaches, her anxiety, or a child's seizures — and we don't look at all the others parts of their lives, some things may be missed, and those things might come up later as a 'new' problem," explained McDonald. "Similarly, if we only treat with one approach, say medication or psychotherapy or yoga, we may miss the possibility of a powerful response to acupuncture, Chi Kung, a change in diet, or a magnificent new awareness in the Sweat Lodge. That's what we mean by integrative medicine: we integrate all aspects of the person, and we integrate all the effective approaches available."

True integrative medicine, as practiced at Next Step Institute, recognizes that no one approach can work for every patient, and that no patient will respond to every approach. The key is careful assessment and that old-fashioned listening to the patient, along with a compassionate willingness to find what combination of holistic and conventional therapies works for that particular person.

Add the power of hope and faith, and miracles really can happen in the mountains! ♦

Cathleen Brooks is the founder and executive director of Next Step Institute of Integrative Medicine, Inc. For more information call Bonnie McDonald at (970) 477-2800 or visit www.nextstepinstitute.org.



Avoid high anxiety at high elevation

Physical exertion at high elevation is more strenuous than at lower levels. Each inhalation at sea level delivers more oxygen than at 10,000 feet in elevation. Consider, too, that "air" is actually 78 percent nitrogen and only 21 percent oxygen. (Miniscule amounts of carbon dioxide and other trace elements comprise the remainder).

Modern air travel allows people to reach mountain elevations quickly and the body doesn't get time to acclimate properly, especially if rigorous recreational sports on steep terrain are pursued soon afterward.

Sensations of being "short of breath" or a general anxiety or restlessness, usually manifest by bouts of insomnia, are common initial complaints. Some people may experience nausea or a pulsating in the neck after exertion. Most symptoms diminish quickly and any prolonged difficulty could be a sign of a medical condition requiring immediate treatment.

Some lowland visitors to Colorado's high country recommend a first night's stay in the Denver area (5,280 feet) to encourage the body's natural adaptation process. In any event, scheduling the more strenuous of activities for later in your mountain visit is always advisable.

Many people report that drinking more water than usual will ease symptoms of "high elevation sickness" as well as avoiding alcoholic drinks and heavy meals. Preemptive oxygen treatment is a matter of debate, having both fervent advocates and detractors.

In addition, don't neglect skin care. High elevation increases the sun's intensity and the potential for damaging effects are compounded by drier mountain air. It's a good idea to seek knowledgeable advice, based on your skin type and outdoor activities, to find skin protection products and options that best suit your needs.

— Mike Spaniola