Donna Hirashima has visited naturopathic doctors (N.D.s) for more than 20 years. "I'm always trying to get treated from a more natural perspective," she says.

She was diagnosed with osteoporosis in her 30s. She tried conventional care, but "just seeing what I had to go through dealing with osteoporosis, it pushed me to look for alternative ways to work with my situation," she says.

Last year, when Hirashima was diagnosed with a fatty liver, the otherwise healthy 60-year-old turned to naturopathic medicine again.

The American Association of Naturopathic Physicians describes naturopathic medicine as a primary health care profession that diagnoses, treats, and prevents diseases while focusing on the natural healing capacity of individuals. It works with nature to restore health using modern, traditional, scientific, and empirical methods.

"Naturopathic medicine focuses on our innate ability to heal ourselves using natural means," says Landon Opunui, N.D., a Native Hawaiian integrative medicine specialist and the first naturopathic doctor to join HMSA's participating provider network.

"Naturopathic medicine is an essential element of integrative medicine, which strives to bring together the best of modern medicine and traditional healing arts in a culturally sensitive manner to optimize whole-patient outcomes," says Ira Zunin, M.D., M.P.H., medical director of Manakai O Mālama Integrative Healthcare Group and Rehabilitation Center. Opunui is part of a team of 50 professionals from disciplines such as conventional medicine, psychology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, acupuncture, and chiropractic and sleep medicine.

The path to licensure is comparable to medical doctors and doctors of osteopathic medicine (D.O.s). Naturopathic doctors complete pre-med classes, earn a bachelor's degree, and attend a four-year naturopathic medical school. They must pass national board examinations and complete two years of internship/residency before applying to the Hawai'i State Board of Naturopathic Medicine. Their scope of
practice includes prescribing certain medications as appropriate. One benefit of team-based, integrative care is the intensive co-management of patients who need medication.

Opunui says naturopathic doctors emphasize health promotion over disease management, personalized care instead of generic care, whole person health instead of symptom relief, and greater autonomy. Large studies suggest that 75 percent of chronic illness results from modifiable lifestyle factors, such as nutrition, exercise, stress management, and tobacco use. While addressing the cause of disease, lifestyle medicine is a mainstay.

Weight gain and diabetes, heart disease, elevated blood pressure and cholesterol, digestive problems, chronic pain, and sleep issues are common problems seen by Opunui. "With our integrative, team-based approach at Manakai, we can individualize treatment to improve clinical outcomes for complex health conditions beyond what I can manage independently," he says.

"While naturopathic doctors alone aren't the answer to fixing our health care system, we're an important piece of the puzzle," he says. Access to naturopathic medicine in an integrative facility can improve member experience, enhance quality care, and reduce global costs.

After her diagnosis of a fatty liver, Hirashima had to find a new physician when hers went on a leave of absence. That's how she met Opunui. Unresponsive to medication, she began an integrative treatment approach, including lifestyle changes and nutrient therapy. In less than five months, her fatty liver disease had fully resolved as demonstrated by laboratory studies and ultrasound imaging.

"I first saw Dr. Opunui in August when he set me up on an intensive protocol. In December, when the tests came back, he called me to say my liver was healed," she says.

And that wasn't the only good news for Hirashima. Last year, HMSA began contracting naturopathic doctors as primary care providers as required by the Affordable Care Act's Provider Nondiscrimination rule. In July, Opunui was the first naturopathic doctor credentialed by HMSA as a participating provider in its network.

"All this time I've been going to naturopathic doctors and none of the costs were covered, so you're talking hundreds of dollars. Now I can see Dr. Opunui and HMSA pays for it. That's made me so grateful. Thank you, HMSA, for that."