

Conversation with Lara Farr—Executive Director, American Association of Naturopathic Physicians

Interview by Dick Benson

As the economy begins to reopen *IMCJ* is relaunching our conference introduction segment for each issue. One of the first live events for 2021 will be the annual conference of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians. In 2021 The AANP 2021 Hybrid Convention will be held July 15-17, 2021 both at the crowd favorite Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix and online in the comfort of your home. The AANP has been working with the Biltmore to ensure rigorous safety measures are in place and enforced, while still offering a fun, engaging & quality Convention. If in-person learning isn't in your plans this July, you can attend virtually and still have access to all of the incredible speakers, sessions, and opportunities as those who attend live!

I had an opportunity to discuss the event with Laura Farr, the executive director of the AANP. Even though many of us are still in the pandemic flux, Laura and her team are excited about this year's event and have had great feed-back from attendees.

Integrative Medicine: A Clinician's Journal (IMCJ): To get started can you provide a little background on yourself?

Mrs. Farr: I have been the executive director of the AANP since the fall of 2017. I live on the west coast, although the AANP maintains our headquarters on the east coast in Washington DC. That's right. I ran the Oregon Naturopathic Association for 12 years before graduating to the AANP. I've been with this profession for about 16 years now and my husband is a naturopathic doctor. I am not, but I'm definitely married to the mob.

IMCJ: To start off can you tell me a little bit about the 2021 conference and how I'm sure it's different because of COVID?

Mrs. Farr: Oh yes, goodness. It is. The theme is *Leading with Innovation & Transformation* and the big difference that we're doing, like many, many associations is a hybrid event, which is the first time that we have ever done that. Last year, we had to do a 100% virtual event. Now, historically we have never done live streaming other than just a simple recording for viewing after the fact.

One of the things we realized last year when we were all virtual, was that we were able to tap into people who are

simply never really able to travel to the conference and it created a larger sense of community for the association. This year we have the option to do an in-person component. We will also be live-streaming most of the lectures to a virtual platform that we used last year and we're going hybrid. I don't think that we'll ever go back to just a 100% a only in-person event. The hybrid is, I think where all associations need to go to really be able to expand the reach that we have in our communities.

IMCJ: Are you going to be having sessions where even at the live events, some of the speakers are remote?

Mrs. Farr: Yes. We will have some speakers broadcasting into the live event from a remote location. We will have live in-person speakers broadcasting out to the virtual platform. Then we also did structure it so that there are some sessions which are designed to be larger, more in depth and hands-on workshop sessions, which will not be broadcast at all and are only available for the in-person part of the conference. That was intended to be a little extra perk that people will get for the extra hassle and expense of having to travel, especially during these challenging times to attend the conference in person.

IMCJ: Are you going to have an exhibit hall at the conference this year?

Mrs. Farr: We are, but everything has been cut down in person to about one quarter of what we would normally have. Our exhibit hall is one quarter the number of exhibitors, our in-person expected attendance and space is about one quarter of what we would expect normally, and the exhibitors are excited, when we announced that we were doing a live person event and would have tables, we sold out in about two or three weeks.

We downsized everything. Normally we would have a large ballroom for our exhibit hall and we would have booths with pipe and drape separating it. We canceled all of that. We are going super simple, just for the luxury of being able to get together. We're just doing tabletop displays. Everything is just going to be a little bit more of a simple, old fashion conference rather than everything with the bells and whistles.

IMCJ: And what about post-show follow up for the presentations?

Mrs. Farr: Our way of addressing that is through our online virtual platform, which all attendees will have access to—whether you're in person or virtual. We'll be open and have all of the sessions recorded, except for those special hands-on ones through the end of the year. That's our variation of doing follow-up webinars is that all of the recordings are accessible so that you can either go back to it or catch up on ones that you missed because you had conflicts in your schedule or you're just brain dead.

IMCJ: How have you seen COVID impact the Naturopathic community over the past 18 months?

Mrs. Farr: I'd say the early information that we had very much mirrored the impact on other primary care providers and family care providers, where all of our clinics shut down. Everybody had to pivot to telemedicine really quickly. Some of our clinics really struggled with that.

Then, for the period of about three to four months, it was pretty devastating financially for many of our providers. Since then, when things started to reopen a little bit, we have heard anecdotally that some of our clinics, especially those that were able to transition to telemedicine are now busier than they have ever been.

In many ways, to us that's an indicator that there's been a surge in interest for naturopathic medicine and the modalities that we use, but we are doing an official follow-up benchmarking survey this summer, to really get data on what the quote unquote medium to long-term financial impact is.

IMCJ: In some regards conventional medicine should have learned a lot from ND's during COVID-19.

Mrs. Farr: Yes. They could have. It has been a tricky situation trying to expand that message at a time when there is so much fear and anxiety and almost paranoia. We've had a number of conversations with regulatory agencies like the FDA or FTC about how important it is to get other information out there and not put all of your eggs in the basket of, "Well, you can't do anything except for wait for a vaccine."

There is no support that you can give to a patient who's having symptoms other than just wait until your symptoms are bad enough to go to the hospital. But we did quite a bit of education. I think we had some receptivity, but it just didn't make as large of an impact as we would have liked.

IMCJ: Building community and networking are always a big part of the AANP, how will this happen at the 2021 event? That's so important, especially in this community. Do you have things in place to combine the live and the virtual people to kind of get that going?

Mrs. Farr: We are still working on that. Primarily we are placing moderators inside all of the concurrent sessions, both in the virtual side and in the in-person side, who can act as a bridge between the in-person and the virtual component. Making sure that participants who are virtual can still get their questions answered in the live in-person environment and vice versa.

That's the number one thing that we've done, is implemented this moderator program in all of the rooms. For the social side of it, that's a little bit more difficult. We've talked about setting up kiosks in in-person events where people can stop by almost like a photo booth and drop into a Zoom room and say hi to your friends who are online. We're still working out some of those details.

With somewhat more intention this time, we have really de-structured this conference. We're not having as many planned events. We're not having as many ancillary meetings for that networking.

We're really just creating an open space with large open receptions, where people can just get together and hang out in an informal way. Instead of having those kinds of structured, every minute is an event or an opportunity or a meeting. That is by design. We just want to give people plenty of time to just reconnect, get together, hang out, mingle between groups instead of being trapped in a meeting or an event.

In Arizona there aren't any restrictions on it anymore. We'll have fewer breakfasts, but we'll still have the lunch buffet like we normally do and the really super healthy foods. We're also planning a couple of evening events. We're trying to keep some activities outside, which is a little tricky in 110 degree Phoenix summer heat but we've planned a pool party on one of the nights — with some music and the restaurant will be running for us out of the bar, the pool bar. Then we're doing a Garden Gala *maskerade* on Saturday night. We'll have some sort of a dance and a buffet.

IMCJ: The topics that you're talking about this year's event cover a broad range rather than a specific focus. Was that by design?

Mrs. Farr: That is by design in part, because we now have more specialty associations in our profession, so they tend to do that deep dive in those specialty areas. But also because we really wanted to promote this as you can go to this one conference and get everything that you need. You can get all of your CE. We've dramatically increased the number of CE that's available. You can view it throughout the course of the year. You can touch on all of the different topics that you might need in a primary care setting. It's very much by design.

IMCJ: Are you seeing that the practitioners are urgently needing to get CMEs, because events have just been canceled?

Mrs. Farr: I'd actually say that we're seeing the reverse, even though so many events have been canceled, there are so many more events that are now online and easy to access that there's a lot of competition out there. We're not seeing as much of a mad scramble this year, as we did last year, when we were in the midst of all the cancellations. There's a lot available out there.

For us, our profession is so eclectic that I could not pinpoint one or two things where there's more of an interest than another. That's why, that's another reason why we decided to touch on so many different topics, to make sure that we had something for everybody.

IMCJ: Are you finding people from all over interested in attending or are there some areas that are still more reluctant about the travel?

Mrs. Farr: Really people from all over. We thought that we might get more registrations from Arizona people, local people who didn't have to travel, but that's not been the case. We've got folks coming from all over the country. I think a couple from Canada. Even though that's maybe still a little bit dicey because of travel restrictions, but they've registered, and people are just coming. They're really excited.

IMCJ: Do you have any kind of vaccination or attendance guidelines for people who attend?

Mrs. Farr: We do not. Generally, we will be following either the local jurisdiction regulations, which at the time in Arizona are pretty lax or we'll be following just general CDC public health guidelines, whatever those may be at the time. But we're not ourselves requiring anything above and beyond what the public health guidelines are recommending.

IMCJ: What are you hoping that attendees both live and virtually get out of the event this year?

Mrs. Farr: Well, education always obviously, but mostly what we're going for is networking. We're just going for that social aspect, getting everybody together, feeling that connection again, which everybody has been missing so much. That's our primary goal, is just fostering a space where people can have fun and actually just be together in person.

IMCJ: Let's talk a little about the presenters.

Mrs. Farr: I'd say roughly about 60% of our speakers are coming in person and we had no problem either recruiting or getting folks to travel. And for those folks who are not comfortable with traveling, it's wonderful that we can offer this hybrid option for them now and get speakers coming in, who we would have missed out on previously. I'm really feeling optimistic about the hybrid model.

IMCJ: When I looked at your speaker panel, you've got a great mix of speakers, some long term and some up-and-comers, was that by design?

Mrs. Farr: Yes, also very much by design. Our convention committee, now we have a liaison between our convention committee and our diversity, equity and inclusion committee. They really go through all of the abstracts with a lens, not just for cultural diversity, but also diversity in voice and age and experience, everything they look at.

That was very much a point of deliberation when we had two abstracts that were on similar topics. We weighed, "Have we heard from that speaker before? Have we heard from that speaker maybe a lot," and is there a speaker who maybe as a new and developing leader in the profession that we wanted to get that diversity of perspective from? That was very much by design.

IMCJ: Going beyond July of 2021, what do you see for conferences and education in the future?

Mrs. Farr: That crystal ball is still very murky, I'd have to say. We still have not selected a venue for 2022. We'll probably be back at the Biltmore in '23. I can't imagine that we would go back to only in-person events. I'm strongly guessing that we'll continue with this kind of a hybrid model but will we be able to grow the in-person and have the huge ballrooms and take up the whole space like we were before? I don't know. We might just stay smaller in person and have a larger online presence.

And attending live events is very, very tough. Some people can't. They are taking care of kids or elderly parents or for financial reasons. There are so many reasons that people can't travel. If you really want to move to a model where you're trying to be inclusive of everyone in your community, you almost have to have some sort of an online component moving forward.

IMCJ: Good. Is there anything you would like to tell people, potential attendees about the event that would excite them and make them want to sign up and go?

Mrs. Farr: It's just, it's really jam packed. This is another thing that has really changed out of COVID, I think because of the ability to do recordings and make them available through the year, but this is one event. It's two and a half to three days, depending on if you're live or in-person or virtual, and you can get up to 57 hours of continuing education.

That's almost unheard of at a price point of \$395. We wanted it to be one stop shopping for all the reasons I've discussed. It's also just a really good deal. We've dropped the price by 20% from what we were charging before. For folks who are taking it virtually, you don't have any of the travel expenses too. It's just a great deal.