

An Interview with Frank Sabatino, D.C., Ph.D.

by Mark Huberman



Frank Sabatino, D.C., Ph.D. is the Program Director of the Ocean Jade Health Retreat, a new health and lifestyle education and fasting center located in South Florida (oceanjaderetreat.com). He is a chiropractic physician who also has a Ph.D. in cell biology and neuroendocrinology from the Emory University School of Medicine. As an assistant professor at the University of Texas School of Medicine in San Antonio, Texas, Dr. Sabatino did landmark research on calorie restriction, stress and aging, and published his research in major scientific journals in the fields of endocrinology and neuroscience. He has also been featured in a variety of books, articles, and cable TV programs, including a CNN special on water-only fasting. Dr. Sabatino is a past member of the prestigious Brookdale Fellowship in Gerontology and Aging, a current member of

the International Association of Hygienic Physicians, and one of the world's leading experts on medically supervised water-only fasting. He is also completing a Diplomate program in the study of addictions, and practices and teaches the energy arts tai-chi and chi-gung.

How did a kid from the streets of New York discover Natural Hygiene?

I had chronic intestinal issues from a very early age. I grew up in the fifties in New York City where some of the greatest so-called experts and medical specialists in the world practiced. But in those days no one thought that lifestyle factors, including diet, had anything to do with bowel function. Even gastroenterologists today rarely consider nutrition when people have bowel related issues. I grew up in a nice Italian household, eating a very conventional diet of animal and dairy foods. The impact of lifestyle never came up. My parents took me to one specialist after another and I was put on various medications, but we never got any closer to the truth.

I knew pretty early on that I wanted to go into health care. While I was in college at the City University of New York, I met a friend's father, Louie, who happened to have one of the most extensive libraries of hygienic literature. He had all the works of Herbert Shelton, Bernard McFadden, John Tilden, and more. Being interested in medicine, I began to read my way through his library. I started experimenting with a plant-based diet, and for the first time in 15 years of medical mismanagement, my irritable bowel

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Was there one book that turned the light bulb on for you?

I read a couple of books by Jack Dunn Trop, including *You Don't Have to Be Sick* and *Please Don't Smoke in Our House*, which began to open my eyes. But it wasn't until I read Dr. Herbert Shelton's *Man's Pristine Way of Life* that

my mind really got blown. This book helped me understand that most of the symptom-disease scenarios that we are inundated with are attempts by the body to rectify and heal itself rather than an entity coming in from the outside that we must wage war on. For the first time, I got a strong indication of what

Natural Hygiene was and how Shelton was a radical thinker by bringing it back to age-old basics.

Why did you go to chiropractic college rather than a medical school?

After reading many books and exploring natural, alternative approaches to health care, I decided I didn't want to get involved with drug treatment and surgery. And I didn't want to spend a lot of time learning things I knew I was not going to use. In retrospect, it may have been an interesting dance. But we always had chiroprac-

tors in our family; I was influenced by their dedication and approach to health in terms of how the body actually functions and what's valuable for it in terms of lifestyle and health education. Chiropractic gave me an alternative way to still do what I wanted but not get lost in forms of treatment I knew I was not going to utilize.

Chiropractic seems to have been the chosen field for most of the leaders of the modern-day Natural Hygiene movement.

Yes. I think this is because chiropractic is a drugless profession. You still had to learn all of the basic sciences, but it was a way that you could practice and get licensed in most cities, states and foreign countries. It also allowed you to bring in people for health education, and you could make recommendations on diet and lifestyle. So being a chiropractor was very suited for a hygienic practice.

Where did you go to chiropractic college?

I went to the original Palmer College of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa. There are now several branches of Palmer in California and in northern Florida. When you grow up in New York City, you deem yourself to be in the center of the universe, so to me there was really no difference between Iowa, Idaho and Ohio. However, I was driven to attend Palmer because one of the chiropractors I met early in my journey was very principled and on-fire when he spoke about chiropractic and health, and I wanted to go to Palmer where he went. And I'm glad that I did; it was an amazing education.

How did you discover the ANHS?

I started a Natural Hygiene club at Palmer College in the mid-seventies.



A very young Dr. Sabatino pictured at Dr. Scott's Natural Health Institute in 1975. Dr. Scott is pictured above center.

During that time, I invited a number of hygienic practitioners to speak, including Dr. Gian-Cursio, Dr. David Scott, and Dr. Keki Sidhwa. Through this I was able to associate with them and share in their hygienic knowledge and information, which included learning about the ANHS (American Natural Hygiene Society; now the NHA, the Natural Health Association). The ANHS was a great talking point for people who were looking not only at chiropractic but at an alternative way of bringing a broader base of health education, lifestyle and wellness into their practices.

Where did you gain your training in fasting?

Shortly after graduating from Palmer I had the opportunity to apprentice with Dr. David Scott in Strongsville, Ohio. Working with him was a life-changing experience, as I was able to see his operation and learn how he supervised fasts. I was also given the opportunity to run his blood lab under his supervision for about a year.

Wasn't Dr. Scott one of the pioneers in doing blood work during fasting, and gauging the progress of a fast and the progress of healing?

Yes, Dr. Scott was brilliant. He paved the way for not only doing blood work, but he devised a number of blood tests that he felt would be great monitors and markers during the fasting state. He ran a very sophisticated blood laboratory right out of his office where he controlled all of the procedures. It was an eye-opening experience for me. It allowed me to learn about blood monitoring and fasts in a way I couldn't have anywhere else.



Do you remember the first ANHS conference you attended?

The first conference I attended as a



lecturer was in Bowling Green, Ohio around 1978 where I remember being very impressed by Dr. Alec Burton. I also met the late R.J. Cheatham's daughter, Wendy, who offered me the opportunity to become the health director of the Shangri La Health Resort in Bonita Springs, Florida.

Tell me about your experience at Shangri La.

Shangri La was founded by R.J. Cheatham. He was a layperson who had a very severe case of malignant melanoma and was given up to die after having some radical surgeries. But having been exposed to Dr. Shelton, Cheatham decided to fast, and wound up living another 30 to 35 years longer than his doctors predicted. He was so inspired by the results of his own care that he opened this beautiful sanctuary in Bonita Springs on the Gulf Coast of Florida. I became the health director in 1978. We would have more than 100 people a week in season. Back then the cost was only three to four hundred bucks a week, so a lot of people could afford it. I remember at times we would have 40 to 50 water fasters out of a population of 110 people. When I look back, and think about the fact that I was the solo doctor there, I don't know how I did it; it was an intense experience. However, it was also a wonderful experience for about two years of my life.

Where did you go when you left Shangri La?

I wanted to open my own place. I traveled around with a partner friend of mine looking at the Caribbean and Key West, and we eventually settled on Sanibel Island. We ran a small facility there for a short time. However, we had some trouble with the local people and their perception of what we were doing, so I had to move on. I decided to move into medical research because I wanted to gather the skills to investigate and evaluate alternative medicine. I wanted to see if I could bring more of an evidence base to what we were seeing clinically that was so powerful. At that point, I taught at Life Chiropractic College in Atlanta, Georgia, which was near the Emory University School of Medicine. I eventually applied to Emory and was accepted into their graduate research program where I spent five years securing my master's degree and PhD. I then spent over a year doing aging research on the faculty of medicine at the University of Texas in San Antonio.

Speaking of San Antonio, did you ever meet Dr. Shelton?

Before I went off to chiropractic college in the very early seventies, my friend's dad, Louie (who had turned me onto Natural Hygiene), wrote a paper called "Social Commentary, a Challenge to Think." We were writing

articles on consciousness and health from the standpoint of the neighborhood. I was this fledgling writer at 18. Louie was in a constant correspondence with Herbert Shelton and they had become friends. Louie sent Dr. Shelton the papers that we were writing, and Shelton published several of my articles in his early Hygienic Reviews. With that connection I decided that before I went off to chiropractic college I was going to go take a trip to San Antonio to meet Dr. Shelton. Unbeknownst to me, he was not well at the time. Dr. Virginia Vetrano was running his center and she was very protective of him, like a mama bird, and she wouldn't allow me near him. So I traveled all the way there and never got to meet him. Later on, Virginia and I became very good friends.

Speaking of the deans of our movement, since you are from Florida, I am sure you crossed paths with the legendary Dr. William Esser.

Dr. Esser was a wonderful man who was iconic in Natural Hygiene. He was right up there with Cursio, Benesh, Gross and Burton, all of whom continued to pioneer true hygiene. Bill was a spiritual and introspective thinker who was wonderful to be around. He was a lovely man who I got to know well; we had some great correspondence. He would often invite me to come to his place. I feel very fortunate to be in that generation that bridged the older, hardcore hygienic docs with those who came after.

Being from New York, did you know Dr. Bob Gross?

Bob and his family were very close to me. In fact, when I was at Shangri La, and even later at the Regency, Bob's daughters would come to me to juice fast or detox. I also knew his wife Joy and his family very well. I would describe Bob as another hardcore early pioneer. Frankly, some of those old pioneers didn't have great trust in some of the newer practitioners because they weren't sure how principled they were. But Bob had a nice connection with me. He liked me and would always kid around with me. He was a very funny guy.

Do you believe that Dr. Esser, Dr. Benesh, and Dr. Shelton were way ahead of their time?

Oh yes, way ahead! The whole hygienic movement was. Let's go back to the nineteenth century and look at Russell Trall and his colleagues, some of whom were even training female doctors, like Susanna Dodge, at a time when it was just unconscionable. If you look at "The True Healing Art," the lecture that Trall gave to the Smithsonian back in 1861, it's like a hygienic manifesto that could be a

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hundred years ahead of its time. The pioneers of the twentieth century, including Shelton, just took things a step further. If you look at the important information in the press today about popular lifestyle factors that influence and control health, these are ideas that have been in hygiene for centuries. They have certainly been in the works and teachings of these earlier hygienic pioneers. I'm fortunate to stand on the shoulders of these giants, and I will always pay homage to the men and women who went before me.

When did you become the director of the Regency Health Spa and how did that come about?

When I was doing my post-doctoral research on calorie restriction, nutrition and aging at the University of Texas in San Antonio, I knew I wanted to get back into clinical practice; I wasn't going to stay in research. I wanted to bridge the clinical and the research. It was at that time that the job at the Regency opened up and a good friend of mine, Joel Jacobson, who had been a partner earlier in another clinic, was the interim director there. He had spoken with the owners who invited me to interview for the job, which I did. When I finished my post doc in Texas, I took over the reigns as the health director at the Regency. I planned on working there for a couple of years and ended up staying for 25!

Between your time at Shangri La, Sanibel and the Regency, how many fasts do you think you've supervised?

I have no idea, but it's certainly in the thousands. When we were doing those fasts, even going way back at Shangri La, we had 40 to 50 people a week fasting, and I was there two years. We supervised a lot fewer water-only fasts at the Regency than at Shangri La. To me fasting is the fundamental root of hygienic practice. That's where the power and the recovery of major problems are most evident.

What is the power of fasting?

Fasting is a profoundly simple power. By this I mean that we are a culture that is constantly dealing with excess and with issues, events and experiences that pull us outside of ourselves. We are always spinning our wheels, running on borrowed time, and burning up energy reserves. Instead of refilling those reserves in a healthy, hygienic way, we usually look for stimulants like coffee and drugs to propel us through the day. Fasting is fundamentally a resting process that allows you to step back from that disengagement. It allows you to go inside and, if done properly, to rebuild those energy reserves. The body has the wisdom and the power to heal, but it needs the energy to act out or to exert that operation. So when you make that

energy available, the wisdom of the system is able to direct whatever healing is needed.

Does the medical world confuse fasting and starving?

Yes, conventional medical thinking has always equated fasting with starvation. But in fact, fasting, in many ways, is the farthest thing from starvation since while in the fasting state you are living on reserves that have been stored primarily in the body's fat, and are available for the system to use over a very long period of time. However, starvation is a situation where you have transcended basic storage capabilities and you're no longer leaning on adequate reserves. They are as different as eating and not eating. Unfortunately, there is still an equation made between fasting and starvation, with the stigma that missing even one meal is an abhorrent idea. Fortunately this attitude is beginning to change, but there is still so much ignorance about the fasting process.

What conditions have you seen respond most favorably to fasting?

All hygienic practitioners have seen great responses in all kinds of irritable and inflammatory bowel diseases. I saw it in my own life in terms of very profound colitis and the impact fasting had on completely eliminating and clearing that up. Dr. Alan Goldhamer and his team have published a groundbreaking paper on how fasting lowers blood pressure. Fasting has also been highly effective in helping with autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis where the immune system is, in a sense, turning on itself and providing a case of chronic inflammation. Fasting also has had a great utility in asthma. We don't like to talk about specific medical conditions because that brings you into the bailiwick of treating disease. But the abnormal physiological states—asthma, autoimmune diseases, and high blood pressure—all respond remarkably well to the fasting state.

Is there one patient whose recovery you found most dramatic?

I had a patient who came in with a diagnosis of Elephant Man's disease, a disease called "neurofibromatosis," where small tumors would develop along the nerve trunks and the nervous system. Because of this she had developed a tumor toward the base of her brain that was triggering ongoing seizures. To control it medically she was put on extensive amounts of Dilantin and phenobarbital, which are used to sedate the nerve system. But because of that she lived in a basic state of coma. When she came to Shangri La, I and a medical doctor who did blood work for me were able to withdraw her from some of her meds through a hygienic diet. Then we put her on a fast for almost 30

days. During that time, the seizure activity increased to a certain degree and then abated, and then she came out of it clear as a bell. She also had a resolution of some of her tumors. Unfortunately, when she left our center she was medically manipulated and brought back into a state of disarray. That was a very profound case, and it had a major impact on me as a 28-year-old who was just starting out in supervising fasts. There are endless stories like this of amazing things that happened in fasts that all the practitioners have experienced.

But fasting is not an end in and of itself, is it?

Certainly not. We talk in hygiene and in natural living about basic biological requirements that involve eating properly, moving more, handling stress more effectively, developing healthy relationships, and so on. These are what we would consider biological necessities. Fasting is not a biological necessity but a tool to an end in the sense that it is a very conservative art of doing nothing but doing it intelligently. Fasting allows the body to correct and heal itself; it can promote remarkable recovery. But fasting is only short-term. What you do the rest of the time is significant. How you eat, move, and live are going to be more important than just fasting. Fasting can be a remarkable alternative to drugs, surgery, and other treatments and procedures that are fraught with potential harm. Fasting is a conservative and valuable approach for recovery and healing.

Tell us about your new facility.

It is a fulfillment of my dreams to have my own center where I control the dynamics. It will be small and intimate, and I will do the hands-on work in terms of providing health education, incredible organic nutrition and, again, getting back to the roots of a stronger foundation in water-only fasting. And this is where it comes full circle: I'm very fortunate to have the backing of a trust that was set up by the late Dr. Scott, who was my early mentor. The trust is providing the funding behind this remarkable operation in order to carry his vision of fasting care forward. I feel very blessed to stand on his shoulders to do this remarkable work with his support. I also want to gather the information that comes from my center and combine it with some of the wonderful work being done by Dr. Alan Goldhamer at TrueNorth Health so that we can create a mutual database that provides information on fasting care that is more scientific and evidence-based. The goal is to share this information, publish this data, and get this wonderful message out to the world.

Where will your new facility be located and when will it open?

We are in the middle of the final modeling and remodeling of the hotel we have acquired in Lauderdale by the Sea, a beautiful area near Ft. Lauderdale. We are shooting for an opening date of before January 1, 2015. There are always issues with permits and building, but it's looking good; we're forging ahead. There will be an incredible food program and, if necessary, people can participate in medically supervised, water-only fasting when that's applicable. So it's going to be a continuation of the work that I've been doing but even more personalized, with more workshops and more hands-on by me. I'm really excited and looking forward to this opportunity.

What will it be called?

I chose to call it "The Ocean Jade Health Retreat" because I want people to recognize our location and all that's associated with it, including the breezes, the warmth, the integrity, and the tenor and quality of what Florida provides. My experience is that fasting is always much nicer when the climate is warmer. Additionally, the gemstone Jade is linked in oriental and Chinese medicine as a symbol of immortality and longevity. My oldest son is a tremendous raw food, vegan chef and he is going to be my chef at Ocean Jade. He's been working in food service for quite some time, so I'm very fortunate to have him as my head chef. My two

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The property of Ocean Jade Health Retreat is just a short walk to the beach.

youngest boys, going on 21 and 22, are still living at home and are musicians, writers and artists.

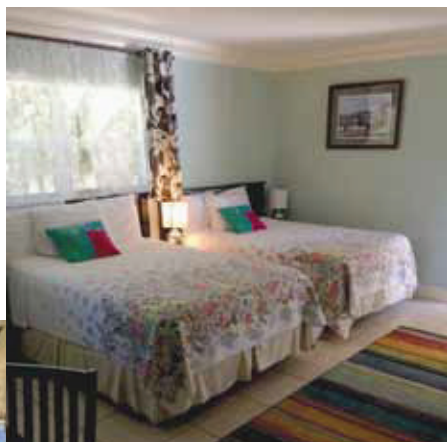
In the last issues of Health Science, you wrote an article about the keys for successfully transitioning to a healthier lifestyle. Why is it so difficult for people to make change?

As we make choices consistently over time, they become embedded in the fabric of the nervous system, and we get into the habit of doing things a certain way. Sometimes those habits may not be in our best interests. The key is to look at what you're doing, evaluate it, and if certain habits are in your best interest, stay with them. But if they're not, change will be wise but not always easy. From early on in our lives we have been inundated with information that is not in our best interest: eating in certain ways, performing in certain ways, and for most of us, being raised on animal-based diets. When we want to make a change, we're now battling choices that have had a long his-

tory and opportunity to weave their way into our behavioral tapestry. That's why having these hygienic centers, these sanctuaries, is important; you can take the needed time to break old habits, look at new ways of thinking and doing, and give yourself the opportunity for new choices to take hold.

Do you have a forthcoming book on that subject?

Yes. It's in press right now and is called *Weightless, Compassionate Weight Loss for Life*, which looks at the plant-based approach to maintaining a healthy weight and solv-



Pictured above is one of the guest rooms.

ing the epidemic of obesity. I got really tired, frankly, of the whole approach to weight regulation in the U.S. It's a very short-sighted approach that looks only at calories or the exercise that a person is doing. It doesn't embrace all the factors linked to how we generate weight. Nutrition is important, so the plant-based, vegan approach is fundamental to hygiene and is ideal for weight loss. And we need to move as well. But we tend to overlook other factors, including stress

and sleep, and how we generate addictions and what those addictions are, and how our addictive habits, even with food, are linked to us seeking pleasure that we're not getting from our lifestyle and relationships with others. Until we address the more panoramic view of what's involved in obesity and weight regulation, I really don't believe people are going to get closer to solving that problem. And the public is sold a lot of quick-fix, fad diets and approaches that may have some short-term benefit but in the long-term only create reactive failure for many, leading to even more disability. I call the book *Compassionate Weight Loss for Life* because it's based on a compassionate lifestyle that makes compassionate choices in a plant-based direction. I believe that true health can only be achieved by promoting the health of the individual as well as all life around us, including the health of the planet itself. So to me, healthy choices are compassionate in that they are connected to the health and well-being of everything around us, not only within us.



The balcony view of the pool at The Ocean Jade Health Retreat

In the fifties and sixties, the leaders of the ANHS and NHA were Shelton, Esser, Gross, Benesh, and Scott. Today it seems like those leaders consist of you, Alan Goldhamer, Stephan Esser, David Richards, and Jeff Novick. What is

your kinship with these guys?

It's a tremendous kinship. I probably know Stephan Esser the least, though every time we've interacted it has been great. I have known Dr. Alan Goldhamer since he was a student coming to conferences when I was lecturing. Jeff Novick and I have become very good friends over the last number of years. I have the greatest respect for Jeff as a teacher, an educator, and someone who is always doing what he can to find the most accurate information and share it in the most pleasant and entertaining fashion. It's great to know that the baton has passed to people of this ilk and quality. I hope that as the years go on, this group of practitioners will continue to push our message forward. I hope they will do work and present research that will make these concepts household names that people can hang their hats on and rebut the wide-spread use of drugs and medical procedures that have not been in their best interest.

I imagine that you practice what you preach.

You betcha! I can't think of any other way I'd want to live. I think it's really hard to do this work if you're not walking the talk. I have been involved in vegan nutrition for close to 30 years, and have been living and functioning this way. I contend that my own longevity, my quality of life and health, and the things that I've resolved in my life have all been the byproducts of hygienic living. If I did not embrace this lifestyle I would not have been able to achieve what I have. I enjoy a level of fitness today that is equivalent to what I had 25 to 30 years ago. I don't believe anybody can do that unless they are embracing the factors that we talk about. The truth is, what we're teaching really works. The question is, how dedicated are we to making that happen in our lives on a daily basis. Too often people don't know about the bounty that nature provides, the various tastes and experiences, just being able to get up and run when you want to without pain. We are a nation that feels that pain and disability is our legacy when in fact it's not. By embracing this whole model of living, you have a tremendous opportunity to get the most out of your years. That's really what it's about. I once went to a talk by a Buddhist teacher who had written a book. I asked him to



Dr. Sabatino with his two youngest sons, Rodin, at left and Dante at right.

world. All of the creative human endeavors are just remarkable to me, especially music, which has been a very transformative force in my life. I wanted my boys to find this out as well early in their lives. It always seemed to me that in order to really embrace life, you need to get passionately connected to all its creative possibilities. Simply being healthy wouldn't be as interesting to me as being healthy and able to enjoy all of the creativity of humanity. To me that's what it's about. 

Dr. Sabatino practices and teaches the energy arts tai-chi and chi-gung.

sign mine, and he wrote, "May you live everyday of your life." I love that inscription. The bottom line is that the mindfulness that is engendered by living in this way is profound, and it brings you closer to the wisdom and power of your own body. It brings you into a state of eternal self-esteem and value, and it allows you to embrace and enjoy life at a level that many people don't.

Did you always strive for balance in your life?

Yes, and this goes beyond hygiene. From a very early age I was interested in understanding things. Perhaps that owes to my growing up in a very creative, artsy place like New York City. I was exposed to a lot of movies, art, theater, and music and have always gravitated toward a more renaissance way of looking at the

