

# INSIGHTS INTO CHIROPRACTIC

*Discerning the true nature of an alternative health care method*

## Do Chiropractors Treat Organic Disorders?

### INTRODUCTION

The genesis of the chiropractic profession is reported to have occurred when a self taught healer of the late 19th century, Daniel David Palmer, manually manipulated the upper dorsal spine of a partially deaf janitor, restoring his sense of hearing(1). As a result of this event and other apparent "cures" or remissions of a wide variety of disease states by patients under the care of chiropractors, many early practitioners of this form of manual medicine made overly zealous claims about the effects their treatments might have on human physiology(2).

Recently, an article in the New England Journal of Medicine which looked at the potential effects of chiropractic spinal manipulation on children with mild or moderate asthma(3) has rekindled discussions about what clinical conditions chiropractors think they can or cannot treat.

Do patients seek chiropractic treatment for organic diseases? Do chiropractors treat organic disorders? The answers to these questions may surprise you.

### ORGANIC DISEASE AND MANUAL TREATMENT METHODS

Although on the surface it seems incredible that manual treatment methods may result in any improvement or cure of organic disorders, there are medical practitioners who have described the use of manual treatment methods for the management of many types of

organic disorders. Lewit, a practicing neurologist and advocate of manual treatment methods, has described his experimental and clinical experience using spinal manual therapy to treat conditions as varied as heart disease, digestive problems, dizziness, respiratory difficulties, migraine, gynecological disorders, tonsillitis, and other various human ailments(4).

Medical authors Bourdillon, Day, and Bookhout state, ". . . there is no doubt in the mind of at least one of the authors that dysfunction in the joints in the upper thoracic spine can affect the function of the inner ear, presumably by way of its sympathetic innervation(5)."

Kunert, a medical physician stated in a 1965 CIBA Symposium, ". . . lesions of the spinal column. . . are perfectly capable of simulating, accentuating or making a major contribution to organic diseases. There can . . . be no doubt that the state of the spinal column does have a bearing on the functional status of the internal organs(6)."

### THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO CHIROPRACTIC

Regarding the chiropractic profession and the treatment of organic disease, nearly twenty years ago this situation was addressed by a government commissioned study looking into the chiropractic profession. The Commission of Inquiry into Chiropractic in New Zealand was an eighteen month government investiga-

tion into the profession of chiropractic and is considered to be the most in-depth dissection of the chiropractic profession to date. In-so-far as the manual treatment of organic conditions is concerned (which the commission referred to as "Type O" disorders), the commission of inquiry found that essentially all practitioners of manual treatment methods (chiropractors, osteopaths, medical manipulators, physical therapists, and lay manipulators) can report improvement or cure in cases of organic disorders. The Commission of Inquiry's published report states: "A number of medical experts told the Commission that the results chiropractors and their patients claimed in Type O (organic) cases were unlikely to be the results of spinal manual therapy. . . However, at the same time no medical expert was prepared to say that such results were impossible, simply because knowledge of neurophysiology had not advanced to a point where the possibility of such results from spinal manual therapy--however remote he might think they were--could positively be excluded."(7 pp.57-58)

Due to the compelling neuroanatomic and anecdotal evidence presented, the commission concluded that such occurrences of improvement or cure in cases of organic disease by manual treatments were quite possible, however, the commission also concluded that the results obtained by manual treatment methods in cases of visceral disease were so unpredictable that the patient should be under concurrent medical care.

It is also important to note that the New Zealand Report clearly stated that chiropractors DO NOT treat organic disease, but rather, treat spinal column dysfunction. To emphasize this point one may look again to the New Zealand Report for an explanation: "The chiropractor does not set out to cure or relieve a particular ailment. What he sets out to do is to ensure that the spinal column is functioning normally. If a particular ailment clears up or is relieved following therapy, so much the

better. If it does not, then at least the patient, now with no spinal impediment to the working of his nervous system, ought to be in a generally better condition and better able to cope with the ailment." (7 p. 57)

As a result of the testimony and evidence regarding chiropractic care and Type O disorders, the Commissioners of the New Zealand Report came to several specific conclusions and recommendations. The report states: "If a patient with a Type O disorder wishes to consult a chiropractor in the hope that some relief can be obtained, there is no reason why he should not do so, provided there are no contraindications to spinal manual therapy, and provided he is encouraged to remain under medical care. . . Chiropractors should be careful to avoid giving any impression that spinal manual therapy will necessarily be beneficial to a patient with a Type O disorder. In particular chiropractors should in such cases do nothing which discourages a patient from remaining under medical care. Ideally the chiropractor should regularly consult the patient's own doctor, although present medical attitudes may rule that out as a realistic possibility."(2 p. 58.)

Responsible chiropractors treating patients with organic disease do so with these findings in mind. Finding a chiropractor who subscribes to the above doctrine only requires asking the chiropractor's opinion on such matters. His/her response will speak volumes regarding their individual practice philosophy.

The entire discussion presented above may be purely academic, however. A recent article published in the American Journal of Public Health reported on the demographics of 1916 patients whose records were randomly selected from 131 chiropractic offices in five cities in North America (4 U.S., 1 Canadian). Hurwitz et al.(8) reported that low back problems make up two-thirds of the patients treated by chiropractors with headache and neck pain and extremity problems making up almost all the rest. Interestingly, only one

percent of chiropractic patients had non-musculoskeletal diagnoses.

## CONCLUSION

In the future researchers may identify some types of organic disorders that may have a vertebrogenic etiology. When and if this occurs, medical physicians and doctors of chiropractic will have a clearer map as to which organic entities might respond predictably to spinal manual therapies. For the time being, however, improvement or cure in cases of organic disorders as a result of chiropractic treatment remains an unpredictable side-effect of restoring mechanical integrity to patients' spines.

## REFERENCES

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