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Print Page

December 08, 2015 1:21PM

SPINE & SPORTS: Is Your Chiropractor Out of Line?

It is well-established that chiropractic care can help people with musculoskeletal conditions such as back pain, headaches or sports injuries and that most people who go to a doctor of chiropractic are satisfied with their experience.

While this is all good, there remains a concern about how some doctors of chiropractic make erroneous claims or push unreasonable care on patients based on an outdated concept of spinal misalignment.

In 1895, D.D. Palmer founded chiropractic on the premise that spinal bones become misaligned, or “subluxated,” less than dislocated, and that aligning or “correcting” them takes pressure off the spinal nerves, allowing vital nerve energy to flow to the entirety of the human body. To be clear, subluxation is a medically-understood entity, but even today, many chiropractors consider even the slightest vertebral alteration to be a subluxation. The reality is that there is no correlation between misaligned vertebrae and health, no proof that vertebrae become realigned, and even if miniscule or grand subluxations are observed, whether or not there might be any health consequences. Moreover, there is no objective, valid test to detect chiropractic subluxations despite over one hundred years of looking.

By the mid 1900s, doctors of chiropractic were breaking away from the subluxation model, redefining chiropractic as a healthcare practice and profession — not merely a technique to “correct” subluxations. They addressed nutrition, ergonomics and pain management and appreciated spine dysfunction and pain without catering to subluxation theory.

Thankfully, more chiropractors are rejecting the outdated and terribly-flawed subluxation paradigm, but most in the profession still have not. Just take a look at the average doctor of chiropractic’s website and you’ll see catchphrases such as “subluxation correction” and even erroneous claims of “taking pressure off nerves,” or how “correction” can cure all sorts of illness, from asthma to autism. Worse, a smaller percentage of chiropractors have taken the “subluxation correction” paradigm to the extreme of x-raying and re-x-raying patients, insisting that their entire family obtain weekly spine adjustments for the rest of their lives and preying on the fear that if they don’t it will lead to illness. What a scam.

Despite all evidence, many chiropractors will not change their tune. This does not negate the fact that many chiropractors help people in many ways, but why people get better from hands-on chiropractic methods has nothing to do with “realigning bones” or finding the subluxation unicorn. The joint manipulation or “adjustment” performed by chiropractors may have more to do with improving how joints move, releasing adhesions around muscles and tendons, creating analgesia from the stimulating effects of the joint manipulation, or possibly from all of these.

The evidence-guided, outcomes-based model of chiropractic care is employed at facilities such as the Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital, the US Olympic Training Center, the Veteran Affairs medical centers, the White House and several pain management and orthopedic facilities nationwide where the term “subluxation” is not part of the lexicon.

The chiropractic profession must advance in this direction, providing logical, reasonable care for the entirety of musculoskeletal health conditions, and this demands that it abandon the dogmatic, antiquated spine “subluxation correction” system that has hamstrung both doctors and patients alike.

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