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SPINE & SPORTS: Surgeon should be last stop for neck, back pain

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A study of America's spending on personal and public health care from 1996-2013 calculated 2013 spending on neck and back pain as the third highest health-related cost in the U.S., second only to costs for diabetes and ischemic heart disease. Unfortunately, fully integrated neck and back pain treatment programs are scarce, and most spine care involves individual providers chipping away at the condition in a variety ways, with many utilizing flawed and costly first lines of defense.

From a holistic perspective, health conditions that drain our health care dollars negatively impact one another. In other words, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, depression and accidental falls can each compound the spine pain patients' problems, such as making them afraid or unwilling to exercise to strengthen their backs.

Patients with general, uncomplicated spine pain are typically prescribed medicines by their PCP and instructed to wait for their pain to subside. This is not a bad option, but while drugs may improve the acute pain, they can have adverse side effects and don't fix any underlying problems. These individuals don't need to rush to an orthopedic surgeon, either. Orthopedic surgeons are highly trained in surgery! They are the last provider needed for the mundane spine pain patient.

Health insurance companies pay out significant sums to providers who really don't understand neck and back pain nor how to treat it, as well as to facilities that perform and rely on tests and procedures that usually have no impact on pain outcome. They seemingly have no limits to paying for unnecessary X-rays,

drugs and orthopedic procedures. Ironically, they limit chiropractic benefit plans, some so much that their so-called “coverage” is an illusion, leaving the recipient feeling surprised and frustrated that they are required to pay out of pocket for much of their care. This barrier prevents sufferers from obtaining what may be the best treatment.

Simply put, the first contact for these patients should be a doctor of chiropractic (DC) or a doctor of physical therapy (DPT). Research suggests that the majority of back pain sufferers benefit most from joint manipulation and soft tissue therapy (chiropractic), exercise/mobility and daily living activity enhancement (physical therapy), emotional/behavioral health care (psychotherapy), a better diet (nutrition counseling) and general exercise (personal training/gym). DCs and DPTs are generally able to determine if the patient requires a consultation with a specialist if pain is due to a fracture or dislocation (orthopedic surgeon), if a disease like multiple sclerosis is suspected (neurologist), or when a condition like sciatica is not responding to manual therapy (physiatrist). Initiating care with DCs and DPTs is the most appropriate and cost effective care pathway.

As the saying goes, “buyer beware,” and in health care the risks and costs to the uninformed consumer can be significant. Neck and back pain sufferers must search carefully for doctors of chiropractic and doctors of physical therapy who are skilled in making appropriate referrals, and have the education, clinical acumen and bedside manner to help them along a path to better health.

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