

Sense About Chiropractic



What is chiropractic?

Chiropractic treatment involves “adjustment” of the spine via a series of physical manipulations. All chiropractors treat back problems, but many of them believe that spinal manipulation, the hallmark intervention of chiropractic, is also effective for a wide range of conditions unrelated to the spine, including asthma, ear infections and colic in infants.

History

Chiropractic was invented some years ago by DD Palmer, an American magnetic healer. Palmer believed that an “innate intelligence” was carried through the spinal cord to the rest of the body. You’ll often hear chiropractors talking about subluxations which they describe as a misalignment of the spine which results in a blockage of the flow of “innate intelligence” causing sickness. There is no scientific evidence to support these concepts. Palmer concluded that 95% of diseases are caused by displaced vertebrae and that the best cure for any disease was chiropractic manipulation.¹

Although chiropractors have developed the method, they still embody Palmer’s fundamental concepts as the basis of diagnosis and treatment. Although scientists have shown these theories to be implausible, most chiropractors do not reject his theory of misalignment of the spine or other bones.

¹Ernst E. Chiropractic: a critical evaluation. *J Pain Symp Man* 2008; 35(5):544-562.

The evidence

Even if the theory behind chiropractic is wrong it may be that the treatments given by chiropractors work and make patients feel better, so we shouldn’t dismiss it without further investigation. To find out whether these treatments are effective, scientists have done many clinical trials where chiropractic treatments are compared to conventional treatments. The Cochrane Collaboration has produced a review that summarised the findings from 39 clinical trials and concluded that there is “no evidence that spinal manipulation is superior to other treatments for acute or chronic lower back pain”.² Most of the clinical trials have considered back-pain, but reviews of trials that do exist for non-spinal conditions, such as asthma, show that there is no convincing evidence to support the use of spinal manipulation.^{1,3}

The Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration is an independent international, not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing up-to-date, accurate information about the effects of healthcare.

² Assendelft WJJ, Morton SC, Yu Emily I, Suttorp MJ, Shekelle PG. Spinal manipulative therapy for low backpain. *The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2004; Issue 1. Art No.: CD000447.pub2. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD000447.pub2.

³ Balon JW, Mior SA. Chiropractic care in asthma and allergy. *Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol* 2004; 93:S55-S60.

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However, some patients say that they feel better after visiting a chiropractor and they keep going back and paying for more treatment. How can we explain all these endorsements? In the same way that taking a sugar pill can make you feel better, chiropractic can give a placebo effect. The physical touch and kind words of a chiropractor can actually make people feel better. Some chiropractors admit that “at least half” of the benefit is due to placebo effects.⁴ Another possible explanation is known as regression to the mean: people tend to go and see a chiropractor when their back pain is at its worst, so it is not surprising that they start to feel better – they probably would anyway.

The risks

Although many people say that chiropractic helps them, around half of all chiropractic patients experience mild adverse effects such as pain or worsening of symptoms, which typically last for a day or so.⁵ Although rare, there have been cases where chiropractic manipulation of the upper spine has been associated with more severe complications, some leading to stroke or death.⁶

The General Chiropractic Council says that “chiropractors provide a package of care that is evidence-based and widely recommended”.⁷ However, looking at the available evidence, which is the only fair way to determine whether any treatment alternative or conventional works, chiropractic has questionable

benefits and considerable risks.¹ Treatment of lower back pain may be an exception,² but conventional treatments such as physiotherapy are as effective and less risky.

The General Chiropractic Council

The General Chiropractic Council currently regulates 2,538 chiropractors and can be found at www.gcc-uk.org.



Professor Edzard Ernst

⁴ Jamison JR. Chiropractic holism: accessing the placebo effect. *J Manip and Physiol Ther* 1994; 17:339-346.

⁵ Ernst E. Prospective investigations into the safety of spinal manipulation. *J Pain Symptom Manage* 2001; 21:238-242.

⁶ Stevinson C, Ernst E. Risks associated with spinal manipulation. *Am J Med* 2001; 112:566-570

⁷ General Chiropractic Council, www.gcc-uk.org, visited 2009.

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