

Can Spinal Manipulative Therapy Be Effective Beyond Muscle and Joint Pain?



For some years now, the Australian Spinal Research Foundation has been interested in research examining how the brain and nervous system responds when you remove subluxations. In many ways, this is the simplest of causes and yet somehow it is incredibly bold. Research has revealed many exciting possibilities tied up with chiropractic care. Still, debate rages inside and outside the chiropractic profession as to whether chiropractic is more than back and neck pain and the only thing that will put this question to bed for good is further research.

To this end, a new study has appeared in the Asia Pacific Chiropractic Journal. Authored by Carrie-Ann McDowell, the systematic narrative review investigates the question of spinal manipulation's validity beyond joint and muscle pain.

In undertaking such a task, McDowell was wading into deep waters in terms of quantity, quality and bias. Chiropractic care is a highly individualised form of care which presents some challenges in terms of designing randomised controlled trials. While these challenges are not insurmountable, they are tricky as chiropractic adjustments are delivered by skilled and trained professionals who know what they are looking for and who adjust people according to the needs highlighted during examination. This can make certain types of studies difficult to design. However, much research has been done.

Original searches yielded 1,294 records to be screened for inclusion in the McDowell review. Following the application of exclusion criteria, 23 records remained: ten randomised controlled trials, three surveys, one cohort study and nine systematic reviews. As systematic reviews tend to take in multiple studies, these are a particular area of interest. McDowell reported three systematic reviews that provided evidence for chiropractic. Among the conditions covered in the reviews were: asthma, chronic vertigo, infant colic, children with ear infections, pneumonia in elderly people, among others. She noted that "Hawk et al concluded that an average of 10.3% of patient visits to chiropractors were for NMSK [non-musculoskeletal] conditions [1]." Furthermore, she noted "an emerging trend towards NMSK research."

However, many papers in these reviews were inconclusive and highlighted further research needs in their conclusions.

Moving on to the surveys, a golden number of 10% turned up again when discussing chiropractic adjustments for NMSK conditions. While some of the surveys included in the study turned up far higher numbers in terms of NMSK conditions, there was an increased risk of bias highlighted by McDowell in the study.

McDowell's findings can be best summarised as the following:

- An average of 10% of patients received care for non-musculoskeletal conditions from chiropractors.
- There is a large quantity of evidence for spinal manipulative therapy beyond musculoskeletal pain, but we need to continue on the hunt for higher quality evidence as the risk of bias or the need for further, more conclusive research still remains.
- We need strong evidence for spinal manipulative therapy in order to maintain professional credibility.
- Chiropractic has a remarkable safety record, low risk of harm and is regarded as safe. The study cited statistics stating, "In Australia, medical error results in as many as 18,000 unnecessary deaths, and more than 50,000 patients become disabled each year [1]." This provides a striking contrast to the low number of adverse events noted in chiropractic research.
- There is more work to be done, but there appears to be a trend towards non-musculoskeletal research.

The full paper is available at the reference below, and it is certainly well worth a read. We know that many chiropractic users have reported benefits beyond musculoskeletal pain alone.

While capturing and documenting this in a high-quality way remains a challenge and an opportunity for researchers and research organisations alike, it is still an enlightening study which shows the work that has been done and the work still yet to do.

REFERENCE:

1. Connor, J., Bernstein, C., Kilgore, K., Rist, P., Osypiuk, K., Kowalski, , & Wayne., P (2020). Perceptions of Chiropractic Care Among Women With Migraine: A Qualitative Substudy Using a Grounded-Theory Framework. *JMPT*. <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0161475420301482> Accessed 28 April 2021

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Tips For Using This Article In Practice

Chiropractic research has been shifting focus in recent years and looking beyond common muscle and joint pain. Evidence supporting the use of chiropractic for non-musculoskeletal pain has been building and providing encouraging insights, including the studies above. With this in mind, how does this affect practice day-to-day?

Here are some tips to help you and your team in practice:

- With an increased focus on non-musculoskeletal pain, there has also been an increase in the reporting of safety factors. The above studies demonstrate that chiropractic manipulation is regarded as a safe care modality. You can give your patients assurance that care is a safe alternative to conventional medical treatment, and that it can be recommended to their friends and family with confidence.
- While only 10% of patients are seeking care for non-musculoskeletal complaints currently, the trend is growing. This is a great opportunity to encourage those patients already seeking care for alternative complaints that they are not alone (or crazy) in thinking that chiropractic care can reach beyond joint and muscle pain. The emerging studies also create the opportunity to educate other patients who have confined their care to the bounds of musculoskeletal pain. Share the information summarised above and discuss the current trends in chiropractic literature. It is an exciting time in chiropractic research, and we want to share that with as many patients as we can.
- In addition to further educating patients, discussing the current research in this area may encourage patients to consider other areas of their health that may already be impacted by chiropractic care. Broadening their ideas around what chiropractic can do and where it fits into their lives may call to mind other factors such as better sleep, energy, digestion or focus, which they may not have previously attributed to chiropractic care.
- This deeper understanding of the scope of chiropractic care's capacity to effect positive health changes may raise interesting discussions with patients, and lead to them discussing what they have learned with their circle of friends and family. This is a great opportunity to broaden your impact and gain new patients.
- It is worth considering if any of your patients or new focuses of care may generate a good case report. Although there is growing evidence in non-pain centric areas of research, it is only early in the journey and there is always more to be discovered. Contributing to this body of work through case reports is one way you can forward the understanding we have about chiropractic care and alternative health complaints. Stay in touch with the ASRF through our [Facebook page](#), to see when we are calling for case submissions, through our [ASRF Case Report Project](#).

We hope the blog article and the above tips help you better communicate your chiropractic messages to your community. We are aiming to create more resources for you and your community in the near future, so be sure to keep an eye out in the monthly Members Update.

Thank you for being a Member of the ASRF!

We truly appreciate your support and contribution to the growing global body of chiropractic research.