

Study Compares Chiro vs. Medical First Contact Care for Hip and Shoulder Pain Patients



Comparisons between traditional medical care and chiropractic care are often problematic, in that our methodologies are completely different. One is a treatment modality geared at recovery from illness, often involving drugs or surgery. One is a care modality geared at nervous system care which then allows the body to express health. While certainly, the latter sees health manifest in many different ways and has been proven as a useful treatment modality for conditions like back and neck pain among other things, we try to steer away from comparisons. Why? Medical care and chiropractic care truly are like apples and oranges. Both have a place. But both are very different.

All that said, a new study has appeared in the Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics that presents a very apt comparison with some compelling results. The study took a sample of 719 patients with spinal, hip and shoulder pain and compared their outcomes based on who they contact first for care.

What they did

The study involved medical practitioners and Doctors of Chiropractic in Switzerland. The sample was drawn from a telemedicine provider that prospective patients could contact for advice about their complaint. The retrospective study took patients with similar complaints and offered them the opportunity to fill out a questionnaire regarding their outcomes. Patients were excluded from the study if their symptoms warranted immediate presentation to an emergency department. Other than that, it is important to note that it was the patient's choice which advice to follow, if any.

Although more than 3,000 people were offered a position in the study, the final sample was 403 patients who had opted to see medical doctors first, and 316 who had opted to see chiropractors first.

What they found

Interestingly, the first difference found was with regard to age. Patients who initially consulted medical doctors were older than those who first consulted chiropractors. (If you want the statistics, the mean age for medical doctor first contacts was 45.7 with a standard deviation of 13.87, whereas it was 41.3 with a standard

deviation of 12.93 years for those who contacted chiropractors first). While this finding in itself is potentially laden with meaning, further research is required in order to extrapolate what this might mean for age-related differences with regard to adopters of chiropractic care.

The study also found that people who suffered from neck pain were significantly more likely to initiate care with chiropractors rather than medical doctors (27% compared to 17%). Unsurprisingly, patients with “insidious onset” were more likely to consult medical doctors first.

The outcomes, however, are where the study gets really interesting. “Adjusted mean pain change scores were significantly lower (0.32) in patients who initially consulted MDs [medical doctors] vs those who initially consulted DCs [chiropractors].” Furthermore, “patients who initially consulted with MDs were significantly less likely to be satisfied with the care received and the results of care compared with those who initially consulted DCs.”

Similarly, costs were lower with DC’s, compared with MDs (although this finding is to be taken with a grain of salt depending on the health care system of the country you are reading this is. Still, it is a reflection of usage rates). The authors of the study noted that “This study showed that spinal, hip, and shoulder pain patients had modestly higher pain relief and satisfaction with care at lower overall cost if they initiated care with DCs, when compared with those who initiated care with MDs.”

While this, at first read, is a shining result, it is by no means the end of the line in terms of investigation. One reason for this is simply because there can be a big difference between statistical significance and clinical significance when it comes to clinical outcomes. Another is that the study was retrospective in its nature and thus there can be a lot of different ways to slice up the pie in terms of pain, conditions, and outcomes. There could certainly be a lot more research to come with this line of thought.

Either way, it is interesting to see such an encouraging comparison between the two groups. The full study is certainly worth a read if you want the full statistical analysis. See the reference below.

Reference:

1. Taco A.W. Houweling, Andrea V. Braga, Thomas Hausheer, Marco Vogelsang, Cynthia Peterson, B. Kim Humphreys, (2015). First-Contact Care With a Medical vs Chiropractic Provider After Consultation With a Swiss Telemedicine Provider: Comparison of Outcomes, Patient Satisfaction, and Health Care Costs in Spinal, Hip, and Shoulder Pain Patients, *Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics*, Volume 38, Issue 7, Pages 477-483, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmpt.2015.06.015>

© Australian Spinal Research Foundation 2023

Originally published as an [ASRF Blog Article](#)

www.spinalresearch.com.au

Tips For Using This Article In Practice

While it is difficult to accurately compare vastly different approaches to care, the study above provides some insight into the differences between groups initially presenting to chiropractic or medical care.

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

- Although this study compares outcomes between those seeking chiropractic care first and those seeking medical care first, serving practice members may require a multimodal approach. It is important to continue encouraging and empowering patients to seek the care they need, and working to overcome wariness of other modalities where appropriate or necessary.
- This study identified that those with neck pain were more likely to present for chiropractic care first. Many individuals within the public may still believe chiropractic is only beneficial for back or neck pain, contributing to this trend. There is a responsibility for chiropractors to continue to push the understanding of their practice members, as chiropractic becomes a care approach for more than just neck pain, and new non-pain focused research emerges.
- Our blog continues to cover recent literature, predominantly discussing subluxation-based research, and may be a useful resource to stay up-to-date with current research.
- That being said, this study is encouraging in that there was a greater change in pain scores for those who presented for chiropractic care first. While it is always positive to see pain relief achieved for patients, this may add to the responsibility of chiropractors to educate their patients that although pain relief is achievable, this is not the limit of chiropractic care.
- To further the work of non-pain focused research, acknowledge novel cases that enter your practice that may make an interesting case report. Not only does this contribute to the growing body of case report evidence of chiropractic care improving outcomes other than pain, practice members may also feel passionately about their story inspiring other patients and practitioners. Although case reports are not the most reliable form of research in isolation, when viewed as a collection they reveal the trends happening in practices and lead to more controlled studies, like the one discussed above.
- There was also a significant difference in the satisfaction between those seeking different care modalities. As many of you have observed throughout your careers, some practice members presenting for care may have been left unsatisfied with the care they have received from other practitioners. Having this study on hand to reference may provide some peace of mind, or potentially generate some open mindedness, for those requiring multi-modal care but who have reservations.

Get you and your team involved and use this blog article and the above tips to help you better communicate your chiropractic messages and recommendations to your community. Enjoy!

