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# The Unsubstantiated Web Site Claims of Chiropractic Colleges in Canada and the United States

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**Objective:** To determine the prevalence of claims by chiropractic colleges for the clinical art which are not currently justified by available scientific evidence, or which are intrinsically untestable. **Design:** A survey of chiropractic college Web sites in Canada and the United States. **Method:** Chiropractic college Web sites were examined for presence or absence of unsubstantiated claims related to the theory and practice of chiropractic. **Results:** Of the 16 chiropractic college Web sites examined, eight made at least one claim for chiropractic theory and practice which is not known to have been scientifically validated, or is not experimentally testable. These eight Web sites represent 10 (55%) of the 18 English-speaking chiropractic colleges in Canada and the United States. **Conclusion:** More than half of the chiropractic colleges in Canada and the United States make unsubstantiated claims for clinical theories or methods on their Web sites. This behavior likely reflects what is taught in the schools. Chiropractors' quest for greater legitimacy and cultural authority is retarded by this tendency. (*The Journal of Chiropractic Education* 17(2): 113–119, 2003)

Key words: chiropractic, education, marketing, quackery

## INTRODUCTION

Chiropractors have long sought legitimacy and “cultural authority” (1). Starr (2) describes the latter as the “construction of reality through definitions of fact and value.” This quest is seen in the profession’s decades-long campaign for licensure (3) and educational accreditation (4), and in its aspirations to the status of a science (e.g., 5–8). Many of the formal characteristics of legitimacy have been attained (e.g., licensure, federal recognition of chiropractic schools), but the profession remains stigmatized. Rosenthal (9) attributed the disrepute with which chiropractors are confronted to organized medicine’s decades-long campaign to discredit chiropractic and to several factors internal to the

profession. One of the self-propagated, inhibiting factors is a continuing commitment to dogma and a tendency to make claims for the clinical art which exceed justification by available scientific data. Although seemingly unrecognized by many in the profession, unsubstantiated claims are viewed by many beyond chiropractic’s borders as prime facie evidence of a lack of professionalism and of quackery.

Our personal experience suggests that the making of scientifically unsubstantiated claims is widespread in the profession. Previous research has indicated some tendency among individual practitioners to “claim success that is largely based on anecdotal evidence” (10). An unsystematic sample of unjustified advertising claims from a variety of sources, including individual practitioners, technique organizations, and a practice-building seminar group, is also available (11). As well, we have documented the presence of unsubstantiated claims in the patient brochures distributed by several large state,

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**The Journal of Chiropractic Education**  
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Vol. 17, No. 2. Printed in U.S.A.  
1042-5055/\$4.00

provincial, and national chiropractic associations in Canada and the United States (12). The current article extends this investigation to the marketing material available at the Web sites of chiropractic colleges in Canada and the United States.

## METHODS

A list of chiropractic college Web site addresses was obtained by searching “chiropractic colleges” on the World Wide Web. Nineteen schools in Canada and the United States were identified; all hold professional accreditation either through CCE-USA or CCE-CANADA. The list was narrowed to 18 English language colleges and 16 Web sites (two sites are shared by two schools each) located in the United States and Canada. Included in the study were the Web sites of Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, Cleveland Chiropractic Colleges of Kansas City and Los Angeles (shared site), Colorado College of Chiropractic of Marycrest International University, Life Chiropractic College West, Life University, Logan College of Chiropractic, Southern California University of Health Sciences, National University of Health Sciences, New York Chiropractic College, Northwestern Health Sciences University, Palmer College of Chiropractic and Palmer College of Chiropractic West (shared site), Parker College of Chiropractic, Sherman College of Straight Chiropractic, Texas Chiropractic College, University of Bridgeport—College of Chiropractic, and Western States Chiropractic College.

Web site inspections were conducted during July 20–24, 2001. Each Web site was explored simultaneously by the authors with emphasis placed on sections dealing with mission statement, “Message from the President,” “philosophy” of the school, and “chiropractic philosophy,” and sections dealing with definitions of chiropractic, the chiropractic profession, chiropractic doctors, chiropractic treatment, and/or the role of chiropractors. Web sites were reviewed for claims related to chiropractic theories and methods for which there is currently inadequate scientific evidence, to the best of our knowledge. Selection of the items identified was based on mutual agreement by the authors. For the purpose of this study, we accepted that current literature strongly (but not uncontestedly) supports the value of manual therapies as performed by chiropractors for patients with low back pain.

## RESULTS

There are 19 colleges of chiropractic in Canada and the United States. Of these, 18 are English-speaking. The Web site offerings of the Université de Québec à Trois Rivières was not reviewed because its Web site content is in French. Two pairs of chiropractic schools (Cleveland Chiropractic Colleges of Kansas City and Los Angeles; Palmer College of Chiropractic and Palmer College of Chiropractic West) share single Web sites. Accordingly, the number of Web sites inspected was 16. Of these, eight were found to include unsubstantiated claims for the value of chiropractic clinical care (see Table 1). These eight Web sites were: Cleveland Colleges, Life West, Life University, Logan, Southern California University of Health Sciences, Palmer Colleges, Parker, and Sherman.

These eight college Web sites varied in the number and character of unproved claims that were offered. A sample of these unproved claims, selected for the clarity of their unsubstantiated character, is provided in Table 2. The most frequently encountered variety of unsubstantiated claim related the putative clinical meaningfulness of subluxation and what has been termed “subluxation syndrome” (13).

## DISCUSSION

This survey of North American chiropractic college Web sites may or may not be representative of training institutions worldwide. As well, Web sites are but one medium by which chiropractic schools communicate with the public. However, the pervasiveness of unsubstantiated claims-making among chiropractors on this continent (10–12) receives additional support from the current survey. Especially troubling implications of the current study are the likelihood that this behavior is learned at the profession’s training institutions, and that it will be fostered within a sizable segment of future generations of chiropractors.

Personal experience within chiropractic education suggests to us that this unprofessional behavior is perpetuated by several factors. Among these are: a) the colleges’ historic and continuing poverty and isolation from mainstream higher education and the wider health science community; b) a tradition of dogma, fallacious reasoning, and unconventional attitudes about research and science (5,6); c) a

**Table 1. American and Canadian Chiropractic Schools, Web Sites, and Presence or Absence of Unsubstantiated Clinical Claims**

School name	Unsubstantiated claim(s)?	Web site address
Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College	No	www.cmcc.ca
Cleveland Chiropractic Colleges of Kansas City & Los Angeles	Yes	www.clevelandchiropractic.edu
Colorado College of Chiropractic of Marycrest International University	No	www.chiro.mcrest.edu
Life Chiropractic College West	Yes	www.lifewest.edu
Life University	Yes	www.life.edu
Logan College of Chiropractic	Yes	www.logan.edu
Southern California University of Health Sciences	Yes	www.lacc.edu
National University of Health Sciences	No	www.nuhs.edu
New York Chiropractic College	No	www.nycc.edu
Northwestern Health Sciences University	No	www.nwhealth.edu
Palmer College of Chiropractic & Palmer College of Chiropractic West	Yes	www.palmer.edu
Parker College of Chiropractic	Yes	www.parkercc.edu
Sherman College of Straight Chiropractic	Yes	www.sherman.edu
Texas Chiropractic College	No	www.txchiro.edu
University of Bridgeport, College of Chiropractic	No	www.bridgeport.edu
Western States Chiropractic College	No	www.wschiro.edu

Two pairs of schools (Cleveland/Kansas City & Cleveland/Los Angeles; Palmer College & Palmer College West) share common Web sites.

sustained concern about the viability of the profession, born of decades of persecution by organized medicine; d) unfortunate choices made by the political leadership (e.g., seeking exclusive right of reimbursement for manipulation to reduce “subluxations” in Medicare patients); and e) a thirst for unity so great (14) that it persuades college leaders to commit to traditional dogma (e.g., 15).

Our misgiving about the inappropriateness of claims for the clinical meaningfulness of subluxation syndrome should not be construed as a rejection of the possible meaningfulness of this hypothetical construct. We assert only that inadequate research has been directed to this traditional chiropractic belief, and that in the absence of adequate evidence, statements concerning the validity of this traditional chiropractic proto-theory should emphasize its tentative character.

## CONCLUSION

A review of chiropractic college Web sites reveals that 50% (8 of 16) in Canada and the United States

exhibit claims for the chiropractic healing art that have not been validated by scientific inquiry. These eight Web sites represent 55% (10 of 18) of English-speaking chiropractic schools in these two countries. This behavior suggests that anti-scientific attitudes are still encouraged within chiropractic education on this continent. A likely consequence is that chiropractors will continue to be stigmatized and alienated from much of the wider health science and health education communities for some years to come.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Joseph C. Keating, Ph.D., for his expertise and guidance in putting together this article.

Received, May 28, 2003

Accepted, July 2, 2003

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**Table 2. Sample of Unsubstantiated and Unjustified Claims According to School and Web Site Page and Basis for Objecting to the Claims Made**

School	Web page <sup>a</sup>	Unsubstantiated (or otherwise unjustified) claim	Objection(s)
Cleveland Chiropractic Colleges	www.clevelandchiropractic.edu/About/index.htm	“Numerous independent research studies demonstrate the effectiveness and economic benefit of the inclusion of chiropractic care.”	Although the value of spinal manipulation for low back pain has enjoyed experimental support, claims for the effectiveness of chiropractic care are not adequately supported by randomized controlled clinical trials (RCTs). Additionally, this claim fails to specify any particular health problem. The cost-effectiveness of chiropractic care has not been experimentally demonstrated.
	www.clevelandchiropractic.edu/About/WhatIs.htm	“A loss of normal motion or position of the spinal segments can irritate or impair nerve function, resulting in malfunction of the tissues and organs throughout the body. Doctors of chiropractic refer to this altered spinal function and its potential effect on the nervous system as the Vertebral Subluxation Complex.”	The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established.
Life Chiropractic College West	www.lifewest.edu/docs/about.html	“Through chiropractic adjustments, nervous system interference due to abnormalities in the musculoskeletal relationships of the vertebrae (called subluxations) can be corrected. This allows the nervous system to function properly, enabling the body to self-regulate and self-heal through its own natural recuperative powers.”	The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established. The value of adjustments in correcting subluxations has not been experimentally established. An improvement in self-healing following subluxation correction or elimination has not been experimentally demonstrated.
	www.lifewest.edu/docs/clinic/faq.html	“Q: What can chiropractic care do for me? A: Help you achieve and maintain good health, naturally.”	Chiropractic care has not been experimentally demonstrated to restore and maintain good health.
		“The bony spine. . . can become displaced and put abnormal pressure on the nerves; this interferes with nerve communications throughout the body. The displaced vertebra is called a SUBLUXATION”	The meaningfulness of subluxation, including any “nerve interference” effects, has not been experimentally demonstrated.
		“By maintaining a healthy spine, a chiropractor enhances the body’s own inborn healing ability, without drugs or surgery.”	Chiropractic care has not been experimentally demonstrated to enhance “inborn healing.”

*(Continued)*

**Table 2.** (Continued)

		<p>“... Everyday childhood activities... can result in a misalignment of spinal bones, and early care can prevent future problems.”</p>	<p>The prophylactic value of chiropractic care, if any, has not been experimentally established.</p>
Life University	<p><a href="http://www.life.edu/newlife/admissions/programs/doctorofchiropractic.html">www.life.edu/newlife/admissions/programs/doctorofchiropractic.html</a></p>	<p>“A vertebral subluxation is a complex of functional and/or pathological articular changes that compromises neural integrity and influences organ system function and general health.”</p> <p>“... the chiropractor performs specific vertebral adjustments to reduce the subluxation and return the vertebrae to a more normal juxtaposition. This process removes neurological distress allowing the body to return to a balanced state of physiological functioning.”</p>	<p>The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established.</p> <p>The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established. The value of adjustments in correcting subluxations has not been experimentally established. An improvement in “balanced state of physiological functioning” has not been experimentally demonstrated.</p>
		<p>“... lifestyle factors help to prevent the occurrence of vertebral subluxations and reduce reoccurrence.”</p>	<p>The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established. The prevention of subluxation has not been experimentally explored.</p>
	<p><a href="http://www.life.edu/spinalhygiene/introspinalhygiene.html">www.life.edu/spinalhygiene/introspinalhygiene.html</a></p>	<p>“... Poor posture leads to permanent spinal misalignment, abnormal curvatures, lack of mobility, and closing off of the intervertebral foramina that carry spinal nerves. The resulting poor spinal health contributes to lifelong discomfort, loss of ambition, disability, premature aging and a host of preventable degenerative disorders.”</p>	<p>The effects of poor posture in creating subluxation complex have not been experimentally demonstrated. Subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally validated. The prophylactic benefit of subluxation correction has not been scientifically validated.</p>
Logan College of Chiropractic	<p><a href="http://www.logan.edu/whatischiro.htm">www.logan.edu/whatischiro.htm</a></p>	<p>“Chiropractic works by restoring your own inborn ability to be healthy... Improved spinal function often equals improved nervous system function.”</p>	<p>The effect of chiropractic care upon “inborn ability to be healthy” has not been experimentally established. The effect of “improved spinal function” upon the nervous system have not been experimentally demonstrated.</p>
Southern California University of Health Sciences	<p><a href="http://www.lacc.edu/dr_chiropractic.html">www.lacc.edu/dr_chiropractic.html</a></p>	<p>“... The chiropractic approach strengthens the inherent recuperative powers of the human body primarily by treatment methods directed at the neuromusculoskeletal system.”</p>	<p>The ability of chiropractic care to strengthen “inherent recuperative powers” has not been experimentally demonstrated.</p>

(Continued)

**Table 2. (Continued)**

Palmer Chiropractic University	www.palmer.edu/pcus/paradigm/tenets.htm	“. . . the significance of the nervous system to health and the effect of the subluxation complex upon the nervous system and, therefore, the body.”	The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established.
Parker College of Chiropractic	www.parkercc.edu/about/index.shtml	“The College recognizes that structural and spinal subluxation syndrome has a significant relationship to somato-somatic, somatic-visceral and viscerosomatic functions of the body.”	The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established.
	www.parkercc.edu/about/facts.shtml	“. . . Chiropractic restores health, relieves pain and restores life with drugless, knifeless, natural, holistic methods.”	Although the value of spinal manipulation for low back pain has enjoyed experimental support, claims for the effectiveness of chiropractic care are not adequately supported by randomized controlled clinical trials (RCTs). It is our understanding that deceased persons cannot be restored to life by chiropractic care or any other means.
	www.parkercc.edu/about/philosophy.shtml	“. . . since the nervous system controls the human body by providing the “life force,” the whole body may benefit; and therefore, chiropractic care may benefit the body with almost any health condition.”	The existence of a “life force” has not been experimentally established. Panacea-like claims to benefit “almost any health condition” are not experimentally testable.
		“The science of chiropractic is based on the innate normal function of life energy, primarily through the nervous system, which is the master system, both motor and sensory. It controls and regulates all other systems ( <i>Gray’s Anatomy</i> ), and normally functions 100% quantitatively and qualitatively both motor and sensory. Even though the body is basically chemical, life itself is electrical and controls chemical. It is homogeneous, balanced and present from birth to burial. Therefore, the chiropractic Science is a PRINCIPLE. An uninterrupted PRINCIPLE always works.”	We fail to understand how most of these claims could be scientifically tested. We fail to understand what several of these statements mean.
Sherman College of Straight Chiropractic	www.sherman.edu/general/chiropractic.html	“Chiropractic’s concern is with vertebral subluxation and its influence on health and health maintenance.”	The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established.

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued)

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	“. . . Ultimately, these misalignments, or vertebral subluxations, lessen the body's ability to function by disrupting communication over the nerve system.”	The meaningfulness (clinical utility) of vertebral subluxation complex and “subluxation syndrome” (15) have not been experimentally established.
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<sup>a</sup>All data were retrieved during July 20–24, 2001.

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