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# A Chiropractic Internship Program in the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care System

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**Objective:** The purpose of this article is to report on the development and implementation of a chiropractic internship program within the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care System. **Methods:** An affiliation agreement was reached between the VA of Western New York Health Care System (VAWNYHS) and New York Chiropractic College (NYCC) in September 2004. A NYCC clinical faculty member received clinical privileges at the VAWNYHS and was charged with the development of an integrated educational program for chiropractic student interns. **Results:** The Veterans Affairs (VA) chiropractic internship program was designed to provide chiropractic services to veterans and provide NYCC student interns with an educational experience within a conventional VA medical setting. With specific learning objectives delineated, both clinical and educational outcomes are being evaluated. **Discussion:** The program is the first of its kind within chiropractic education and serves as a model for additional programs that train students to function within the VA Health Care System. (The Journal of Chiropractic Education 19(2):92-96, 2005)

Key words: chiropractic, chiropractic education, internships, Veterans Affairs

## INTRODUCTION

On January 23, 2002, President George W. Bush established a permanent chiropractic benefit within the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) Health Care System by signing into law H.R. 3447: Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Programs Enhancement Act of 2001 (1). A provision of this new law was the creation of a DVA Chiropractic Advisory Committee, designed to counsel the Secretary of the DVA regarding the implementation of chiropractic involvement in the Veterans Affairs (VA) system. On November 3, 2003, the DVA Chiropractic Advisory Committee formally submitted a list of 38 recommendations to DVA Secretary Anthony Principi covering various aspects of chiropractic integration within the DVA Health

Care System (2). In March of 2004, Secretary Principi announced that he would implement the DVA Chiropractic Advisory Committee's recommendations, and on June 25, 2004, he revealed the 26 VA hospitals and clinics that would begin providing chiropractic services to veterans in the fall of 2004 (2). One of the selected facilities is the VA of Western New York Health Care System (VAWNYHS) in Buffalo, New York.

In response to the DVA Chiropractic Advisory Committee's recommendation number 37 regarding academic affiliations, Secretary Principi authorized selected VA hospitals to "enter into VA approved affiliation agreements with accredited chiropractic institutions, in order to provide opportunities for appropriately supervised educational experiences for student and graduate preceptor programs" (3). With this authorization, New York Chiropractic College (NYCC) and VAWNYHS entered into an affiliation agreement with the signing of a memorandum of understanding bridging chiropractic and medicine

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within the DVA. The author received clinical privileges on August 27, 2004 and instituted a chiropractic student internship program within the DVA Health Care System. With the first chiropractic consult occurring in the VA Chiropractic Clinic in VAWNYHS on October 1, 2004, an unprecedented educational opportunity for chiropractic student interns had begun.

The purpose of this article is to report on the development and implementation of a chiropractic internship program within the DVA Health Care System.

## METHODS

### Program Design

The purpose of the VA chiropractic internship program is threefold: 1) to provide quality chiropractic care with measurable clinical outcomes to the patient population that we serve; 2) to provide chiropractic student interns with an advanced understanding of chiropractic integration within a conventional VA medical center (VAMC); and 3) to explore various research opportunities within the VA Health Care System. The VAWNYHS Chiropractic Clinic is aligned within the Orthopedic Surgery department under the leadership of the Chief of Orthopedic Surgery. This alignment occurred under the direction of the VA Medical Care Line Director for organizational purposes and because of the involvement of Dr. Israel Ziv, an orthopedist who has been instrumental in the design and continued operation of this program. The Chiropractic Clinic occupies two treatment rooms on the floor with both Orthopedics and Chronic Pain Management. The Chiropractic Clinic offers services to veterans 3 days a week with 36 available treatment slots per week for established patients and up to six consultation appointments per week to accommodate new patients. Chiropractic is a specialty service within the VAWNYHS with access to chiropractic for veterans coming through a consult request or referral from a VA primary care provider or specialty provider within the boundaries of musculoskeletal medicine. There were over 100 consult requests for chiropractic evaluation and management within the first 3 months of operation from primary care, orthopedics, chronic pain management, or the emergency room.

The chiropractic student interns are selected for the VA internship by the VA doctor of chiropractic and another NYCC faculty clinician who serves as

a liaison between the college and Department of Defense (DoD)/VA facilities. This competitive application process is based on evidence of attainment of attitudinal and performance standards, quantitative requirements, and relevant experiences in multidisciplinary settings. Selected 8th-, 9th-, or 10th-trimester student interns receive an orientation to the VA Chiropractic Clinic policies and procedures prior to direct patient care and other involvement within the hospital. The VA chiropractic internship began as an 8-week rotation consisting of both a clinical component and a research or project component. The clinical component involves 18 hours per week of supervised chiropractic patient management as well as 10 hours per week of rotations within the Orthopedic Clinic under the supervision of Dr. Israel Ziv. The orthopedic rotation includes both orthopedic patient management and surgical observation. The student interns are also involved in at least 6 hours per week of data collection, review of literature, project assignments, or clinical research based on available opportunities. The complete VA chiropractic internship constitutes over 270 hours of clinical and research experience designed with specific learning objectives for the student interns (see Table 1).

### Learning Objectives

Within the clinical component of the VA chiropractic internship, the student intern gains exposure to a unique patient population within a conventional medical setting. The student interns are involved in every stage of patient management and learn to do the various tasks detailed in Table 2. Through the clinical elements of chiropractic patient care and orthopedic observation, the student interns reinforce and enhance their knowledge and skills in the areas of evaluation, clinical correlation, patient management, and interprofessional communication. It is expected that the chiropractic student intern will

**Table 1. VA Chiropractic Internship Program Design**

VA chiropractic internship component	Hours/week
Clinical component	
Supervised chiropractic patient management	18
Orthopedic rotation (clinic & surgery)	10
Research/project component	6

**Table 2. Learning Objectives of the Clinical Component of the VA Chiropractic Internship**

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1. Perform chart reviews of patient consult requests to determine appropriate patient selection for chiropractic evaluation.
  2. Evaluate patients and document patient history, examination findings, clinical impression, and plan in the computerized patient record system.
  3. Review appropriate informed consent procedures along with the supervising VA doctor of chiropractic.
  4. Work as part of a health care team delivering chiropractic services in a conventional medical setting.
  5. Utilize standard outcome measures to determine effectiveness of care.
  6. Discharge or refer patients based on clinical necessity or the patient reaching a point a maximal chiropractic improvement.
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demonstrate increasing proficiency and competency progressing to mastery of various aspects of clinical chiropractic practice in an integrated setting.

The research or project component involves activities and assignments designed to develop intern skills and awareness detailed in Table 3. The particular activity or assignment is determined by the supervising VA chiropractor based on available resources, program needs, and areas of student interest. To date, student interns have participated in the collection of clinical outcomes data, worked on a review of literature for a research paper, designed a PowerPoint presentation on a clinical topic in collaboration with the Orthopedic Department, participated

**Table 3. Learning Objectives of the Research Component of the VA Chiropractic Internship**

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1. Teach student interns to collect and critically analyze clinical data.
  2. Teach student interns to perform a review of relevant scientific literature.
  3. Design in-service presentation for delivery within the hospital environment.
  4. Give student interns an understanding of Institutional Review Boards and the clinical research process.
  5. Inspire collaboration between providers of different disciplines and encourage students to develop professional relationships outside of their scope of practice.
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in in-service presentation development, worked with a physician assistant to create dietary and lifestyle health behavior handouts for patients, and developed exercise instruction handouts for patients within both chiropractic and orthopedics. The quality of their work has been excellent and the skills learned in the process are designed to improve the student intern's ability to function within an integrated health care setting.

The supervising VA chiropractor performs regular evaluations of the intern's activities relative to site-specific performance expectations and clinical competencies integral to patient care and case management. The supervising VA chiropractor and orthopedist remain in close communication with regard to the conduct and performance of the student interns and provide feedback when appropriate. Student intern personal contact information is obtained so that the impact of VA chiropractic internships on professional practice can be determined years later in terms of various measures including professional activities, income, and career satisfaction. With the first four interns having completed their VA experience, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from students, patients, VAMC faculty, staff, and administration.

## DISCUSSION

With the exception of exchanges between professional chiropractic organizations and legislative highlights, the literature regarding chiropractic educational involvement within the VA Health Care System is limited. The significance of this VA chiropractic internship is that it represents the only educational opportunity of its kind currently available to chiropractic student interns. With legislation supporting chiropractic within the VA Health Care System, it is important that chiropractic education address this newly available and expanding professional environment by training students to practice within this integrated federal health care setting. Within the DoD, there are programs similar in design and scope for chiropractic student interns. Under the direction of Dr. Terry Kearney and Dr. William Morgan, NYCC and the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda, Maryland, began a military hospital-based internship in July of 2001 (unpublished data, 2003). Student interns take part in supervised chiropractic patient management, experience rotations through radiology, orthopedics, rheumatology, and physical medicine

and rehabilitation, and receive assignments from the supervising chiropractors to enhance their educational experience within the hospital setting during their 4-month internship (unpublished data, 2003).

In February of 2003, Camp LeJeune Marine Corps base became the second military base to establish an affiliation agreement with NYCC to provide DoD chiropractic internships (4). The 4-month chiropractic internship at Camp LeJeune is similar in content to that of Bethesda with a combination of supervised chiropractic management and rotations through medical departments, including internal medicine, neurology, orthopedics, podiatry, and radiology. To date, 30 NYCC students have taken part in DoD chiropractic internships at either Bethesda or Camp LeJeune since their inception, with current research evaluating the impact of these programs on the chiropractic practice careers of internship participants (unpublished data, 2004). Although the VA chiropractic internship program is shorter in duration, it allows for the same number of student interns to participate each trimester as both DoD settings combined. In addition, the VA chiropractic internship does not require student interns to relocate to take advantage of this educational opportunity. The proximity of the VAMC to the NYCC Chiropractic Health Center in Depew, New York affords selected VA student interns the ability to continue to see patients at the Health Center and benefit from the resources of NYCC and their continued professional development and association with their fellow interns.

Limitations of the VA chiropractic internship program are associated with the program's relative infancy. Physical plant limits and having a single VA doctor of chiropractic to supervise student interns has resulted in having insufficient internship positions to satisfy student demand. Continued program development could potentially create additional opportunities for a larger number of student interns. Feedback from the small number of students who have completed the internship has been largely informal and the eventual impact of the VA chiropractic internship program on student interns will not be realized for some time. The VA chiropractic internship program will continue to be evaluated critically to improve the quality of the educational experience for the student interns in the VAWNYHS.

The implications of the VA chiropractic internship program are significant with relation to research

opportunities, the development of a chiropractic residency program within the VA Health Care System, and the potential for continued growth and increased opportunities for student interns. In terms of research, the combined resources of NYCC, VAWNYHS, and the patient population whom we are honored to serve create almost endless possibilities to advance scientific knowledge through chiropractic clinical research. To support research activities, a VA chiropractic residency program is in development that would provide an opportunity for chiropractors to earn an advanced degree, contribute to chiropractic research efforts within the VAMC, and be trained to direct a chiropractic department within the VA Health Care System. The success of the VA chiropractic internship program locally will allow for the program to expand to involve more student interns and encourage additional academic affiliations to develop between VA hospitals and other chiropractic institutions. By continuing the ground-breaking work of DoD chiropractors, chiropractic within the VA Health Care System will be well situated to serve the needs of veterans, chiropractic student interns, and the chiropractic profession as a whole.

## SUMMARY

Legislative and VA Health Care System support has helped NYCC to create an internship program with a VA hospital for select chiropractic student interns. Beginning in the fall of 2004, NYCC student interns began 8-week rotations within VAWNYHS involving direct patient management, interdisciplinary collaboration, and chiropractic research. The VA chiropractic internship program was designed with specific learning objectives, unique to the VA health care setting, in the areas of clinical competency and related research projects and assignments. These student interns are pioneers from the perspective of chiropractic education and it is the hope of the author that this experience will enable program participants to create new opportunities for themselves and our profession in the integrated health care arena both within and outside of DoD/VA medical settings.

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