

Realigning the spine



For most of the aches and pains that afflict the human spine nothing is more impressive than a good laying on of hands. Hence the immense success of masseurs, manipulators, osteopaths, chiropractors, and even friends and relatives, who push, pull, press, rub, or

click back into place parts disgruntled by excessive wear and tear.

Nowadays in America the osteopaths have become for practical purposes indistinguishable from their allopathic cousins. Chiropractors have also become accepted—after several restraints of trade suits forced the American Medical Association to suspend its campaign against them and allow them to practise in the hospitals. The association's major complaint had been that the chiropractors not only pushed and pulled but also manipulated spinal "sions" or realigned "subluxations" to cure diabetes, asthma, colitis, and even learning disabilities.

Since I first wrote about the origins of chiropractic and its relation to phrenology

and mesmerism (*BMJ* 1979,1579), its practitioners have greatly expanded their activities. Recently they have mounted a massive marketing campaign to persuade parents to use them as primary care paediatricians. Using advertisements, seminars, and offers for free checkups, they have developed a large following among parents disgruntled with modern medicine and attracted by the prospect of treatment without drugs. They promise to cure colds, allergies, colic, etc., by realigning subluxations that have impaired the immune response. It follows from this that vaccinating children is no longer needed, and indeed they tell parents not to bother. They also treat birth "subluxations" by gently striking newborns on the back of the neck with a special instrument.

Predictably, they have been successful with the many self-limiting symptoms that periodically trouble the human race. But they have also brought on paraplegias by manipulating patients with spinal tumours, and caused mastoiditis with cerebral abscess and facial paralysis by mistreating otitis media. Some of their fiercest critics come from within their own profession, from those who believe that chiropractic is "a limited branch of medicine having to do with musculoskeletal disorders." But, notwithstanding their critics, they remain licensed in all states, their colleges are

accredited, and their services are reimbursed by the government. From the medical profession criticism has been muted, largely because of the ruling permanently debarring the American Medical Association from interfering.

In many respects the resurgence of chiropractic reflects the growing interest of Americans in alternative medicine. Currently about one third of Americans use unconventional treatments, at a cost of some \$10 billion a year, one third paid for by public funds or private insurance. Such treatments include relaxation techniques, therapeutic massage, special diets, megavitamins, and of course chiropractic. Reasons given for this trend are easy access, promised cure, plenty of attention and time, and dissatisfaction with the complexity, cost, aloofness, and dangers of modern medicine.

Alternative treatments have also become popular for pets. They include homoeopathy, acupuncture, herbs, and massage. Success has been reported with dogs and horses, also with squirrels, rabbits, skunks, gerbils, ferrets, and birds. Many patients have become quite symptom free, to the great joy of their owners. One large dog, afraid to sleep because he had been beaten badly as a puppy, was described as taking his first afternoon nap after his spinal cord had been adjusted.

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