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CHIROPRACTIC AND INFECTIOUS DISEASE — AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Dr. Christopher Kent

As a collector of chiropractic memorabilia, I am awed the breadth of vision demonstrated by those who went before us. Even more impressive are some of the spectacular results reported by early chiropractors in patients with infectious diseases.

One example where chiropractic care provided a beacon of light was the 1917-18 influenza epidemic, which brought death and fear to many Americans. It has been estimated that 20 million died throughout the world, including about 500,000 Americans. Walter Rhodes [1] provides fascinating information about the profession during those years. A chiropractic pioneer wrote, "I was about to go out of business when the flu epidemic came — but when it was over, I was firmly established in practice." The results were spectacular.

Rhodes reported that in Davenport, Iowa, medical doctors treated 93,590 patients with 6,116 deaths — a loss of one patient out of every 15. Chiropractors at the Palmer School of Chiropractic adjusted 1,635 cases, with only one death. Outside Davenport, chiropractors in Iowa cared for 4,735 cases with only six deaths — one out of 866.

During the same epidemic, in Oklahoma, out of 3,490 flu patients under chiropractic care, there were only seven deaths. Furthermore, chiropractors were called in 233 cases given up as lost after medical treatment, and reportedly "saved all but 25."

The unnamed authors of the 1925 book, "Chiropractic Statistics," undertook a more comprehensive survey. [2] This text is a compilation of the responses of practicing chiropractors to a questionnaire. The report covers 99,976 cases reported by 412 chiropractors in 110 specific conditions. A sampling follows:

Gonorrhea: 408 cases involving 136 chiropractors were reported. 341 cases showed complete recovery or very decided improvement. 66 cases showed little or no improvement. There was one fatality. The percentage of recoveries stated was 83.6%.

Influenza: Reports covering 4,193 cases by 213 chiropractors were provided. 4,104 showed complete recovery. 79 patients showed little or no improvement, and 10 fatalities were reported. The percentage of recoveries cited was 99.4%.

Measles: 121 chiropractors reported on 673 cases. 665 cases showed complete recovery or "very decided" improvement. Seven showed little or no improvement. One fatality was reported. The percentage of recoveries reported was 98.8%.

Scarlet Fever: There were 149 cases involving 60 chiropractors. 147 were reported as completely recovered. Two showed little or no improvement. There were no fatalities. The percentage of recoveries was said to be 98.7%

Smallpox: 45 chiropractors attended 101 cases. 100 showed complete recovery. One was referred to another practitioner. There were no fatalities.

Chiropractic texts also addressed strategies for adjusting and managing patients with infectious conditions. "Chiropractic Practice — Volume 1 — Infectious Diseases" [3] discusses adjusting techniques and case management for conditions including, for example, measles, mumps, chickenpox, typhoid fever, meningitis, malarial fever, whooping cough, infantile paralysis and tuberculosis.

Of course, that was another era. The research methodology of today simply didn't exist. Furthermore, chiropractic is not a treatment for a specific disease. Please don't use these reports as the basis for a Yellow Pages ad!

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I find these reports from the past fascinating when taken in the context of contemporary biology. Recent research has revealed much about how the nervous system is involved in the immune process. Some of these studies have been reviewed in previous columns. [4,5,6]

A comprehensive review of the literature summarizes our current understanding. [7] "The brain and immune system are the two major adaptive systems in the body. During an immune response, the brain and the immune system 'talk to each other' and this process is essential for maintaining homeostasis... Two pathways link the brain and the immune system: the autonomic nervous system (ANS) via direct neural influences, and the neuroendocrine humoral outflow via the pituitary... the ANS regulates the function of all innervated tissues and organs throughout the vertebrate body with the exception of skeletal muscle fibers."

In a world where we are faced with antibiotic resistant bacteria, and viral diseases where effective treatments are lacking, the role of chiropractic care in allowing for optimum immune system function deserves through exploration.

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2

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