

Why Do Patients Seek Chiropractic Care? **by Dr. Ken Spresser**

In a recent Rand study published this year in *Spine* (Vol. 27, No. 23) Ian Coulter et al answered the question as to who uses chiropractic care and why. We now know, especially from David Eisenberg, M.D. in his original articles on ‘unconventional medicine’ in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1993 and in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* 1998, that use of alternative healthcare went from thirty-four percent in 1990 to forty-two percent in 1997. The answer to the first question posed has not been explained until the article entitled, “Patients Using Chiropractors in North American” by Ian Coulter et al. If we know better who our patients are and why they seek chiropractic care, we can at least in theory broaden our patient base.

Statistics are very useful in analyzing how patients get into our office. Of the sixteen alternative therapies, chiropractic is the most used at thirty-one percent of total visits followed by massage therapy at eighteen percent of the total visits. There are about fifty thousand chiropractors in active practice in North American and we have more than tripled in the last twenty years. It is estimated that the number of chiropractors will double in the next eight years (whereas the number of medical physicians will only rise sixteen percent). The proportion of patients using chiropractic services has doubled in the last twenty years, also. Most chiropractic patients are white, middle aged, married and have high school as their highest level of education. By far the great majority of care is for musculoskeletal conditions particularly back pain.

According to the data, non-musculoskeletal conditions are not commonly treated. Patients probably really determine what chiropractors treat and these problems are most likely where medicine has left efficacious therapy. In general, a patient seeking care from a chiropractor is substantially physically impaired and in pain compared with the back pain patients seeking care from a medical doctor. Chiropractors and their patients tend to agree on some of the key tenants of chiropractic theory with patients actually holding these tenants more strongly than the chiropractors. Research suggests that compatibility of belief systems is a powerful element in the chiropractic health encounter. These healthcare beliefs are: A) The chiropractor facilitates good health but it is the patient who must achieve it. B) Patients who don’t follow the chiropractor’s advise are unlikely to get well. C) The chiropractor will do his part; the rest is up to the patient. D) Individual behavior is as important to good health as is the chiropractic care, and E) Good health is the responsibility of the patient.

Chiropractic patients are very satisfied with their care. Results of this study suggest that the current role of chiropractic in the healthcare system is a highly focused one, not a broad-based alternative. Considering the healthcare marketplace, a chiropractor might focus his energy towards the cross cut of society that best utilizes chiropractic care.