

# Should Chiropractors Be Paid With Your Tax Dollars?

BY ALBERT Q. MAISEL

*The long-standing controversy over the legitimacy of chiropractic—the treatment of disease by “adjustment of the spine and its articulations”—becomes a multimillion-dollar question this year. Congress is preparing its final version of the Social Security Amendments bill. At issue, in an obscure clause of that bill: Should the federal government be required to pay the chiropractic fees of Medicare beneficiaries? An affirmative answer would increase the cost of the Medicare program by an estimated \$60 million a year. It would also set a precedent that would inevitably extend tax-subsidized chiropractic service to everyone covered by any one of the broad national-health-insurance programs now being considered by Congress—raising the annual cost of any such program by as much as half a billion dollars. Here are facts you should know about this critical issue.*

**T**HE BATTLE lines are firmly drawn between the chiropractors and their foes. In lobbying for federal payment for their services, chiropractors argue that they are members of a recognized health profession, licensed by all states except Louisiana and Missis-

sippi. As such, they contend that they should be granted the same status that Medicare has accorded to doctors of medicine and osteopathy.

Critics of chiropractic, including the American Medical Association, maintain that it is a form of quackery, and that those who practice it

are no more entitled to recognition than snake-oil peddlers. Because chiropractors lack both the training and the background to diagnose or treat diseases, critics claim, underwriting their "services" would actually endanger the lives of countless Medicare patients by delaying accurate diagnosis of major ailments.

Given these diametrically opposed viewpoints, let us try to discover where the truth and the public interest really lie.

**The Palmer Method.** Chiropractic owes its existence to a single man, David Daniel Palmer, a grocer-turned-"magnetic healer" who, in 1895, "cured" one patient of deafness, another of heart trouble, by manual adjustments of their vertebrae. On the basis of these two cases, Palmer concluded: "If diseases so dissimilar as deafness and heart trouble came from pressure on nerves," then "a subluxated [partly dislocated] vertebra is the cause of 95 percent of all diseases."\* Since then, chiropractors have adhered basically to Palmer's single-cause theory of disease and to his method of treating all illness by adjustment of the spine.

Today, the estimated 15,000 to 17,000 active chiropractors are divided into two, often bitterly contending, groups. Representing the so-called "straights" is the International Chiropractors Association,

which regards any form of treatment other than spinal adjustment as a heretical deviation from the doctrines laid down by the founder. The "mixers," represented by the American Chiropractic Association, augment their spinal adjustments with nutritional supplements and with some forms of physiotherapy. Both groups, however, renounce the use of all forms of medication, vaccination and surgery.

**Schools for Salesmanship.** After making his discovery, Palmer opened a chiropractic school to teach others how to adjust spines. The course ran for several months, and the only admission requirement was a \$500 fee. His son, B. J. Palmer, put the school on its feet with advertising that effectively promoted a cheap way to acquire quickly both a good income and prestige. "Our school," he explained, "is on a business, not a professional, basis. We manufacture chiropractors."

Soon, however, many of Palmer's newly manufactured "doctors" discovered that teaching was even more lucrative than practicing. Hundreds of colleges of chiropractic sprang up all over the country, many offering correspondence courses complete with mail-order degrees. By the late 1920s, state legislators had become alarmed that such inadequately schooled people, claiming to be "doctors," were treating hundreds of thousands of gullible people for real or imaginary ills. Thus, in state after state,

\*Palmer decided that the remaining five percent, including bunions and corns, were the result of "displaced bones" in the feet.

"Basic Science Laws" were passed, requiring that all who thereafter sought to practice healing—medical doctors, osteopaths\* and chiropractors—must first pass examinations in such sciences as anatomy, bacteriology, chemistry and pathology.

Unequipped to teach these sciences, the vast majority of chiropractic diploma mills soon closed down. Today, only 11 chiropractic colleges are still operating in the United States. Like medical schools, they offer a four-year course. But here the resemblance to colleges of medicine ends. With under-manned faculties instructing poorly qualified students, the education they provide is inevitably of poor quality. (This has been demonstrated in those states in which the same Basic Science examinations are given to medical and chiropractic students, and the examinations are uniformly graded by the same board. Eighty-four percent of the chiropractic students fail the exam the first time around, while an average 81 percent of medical students pass.)

Many chiropractors, however, do take a special type of postgraduate course, variously labeled "Success

Motivation Seminar," "Chiropractic Economics" or "Practice Building." In 1970 alone, for instance, more than 4000 chiropractors and their wives or receptionists attended seminars sponsored by the Parker School for Professional Success in Fort Worth, Texas.

Here, for a \$250 fee, they are taught the intricacies of chiropractic salesmanship: from how to check a patient's address for income status to the "Yet" method of convincing a patient that his illness may be more severe than he thinks it is. (If the patient has a pain in his left shoulder, for example, students are instructed to ask, "Has the pain started in your right shoulder yet?") They also learn how to win the confidence of skeptical patients by placing a Bible in the reception room, and how to get patients to return by advising them to come in for a monthly adjustment "so you will stay in good health."

**The Qualified License.** Until late in the 19th century, most states permitted anyone who claimed to be a physician to practice medicine, without regard to training or education. By 1895, however, all existing states had passed Medical Practice Acts defining what constituted the practice of medicine, prescribing standards of education for the licensing of physicians and prohibiting the practice of medicine to all those unqualified for such licenses. So, in the early years of chiropractic, many graduates of chiropractic schools found themselves prosecuted—and

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\*Osteopathy is a system of medicine which places particular emphasis upon the importance of the musculo-skeletal system; its practitioners receive extensive training in detecting and treating disturbances affecting bones and muscles. Like M.D.s, osteopaths must complete at least three years of pre-professional college training and four years of professional education, which is almost invariably followed by internship and residency training. They are fully licensed physicians in 48 states and the District of Columbia.

frequently jailed—for violation of the Medical Practice Acts.

But chiropractors fought back, lobbying for laws that would legalize their status through licensing. They were bitterly opposed by the medical profession which—then, as now—regarded chiropractors as uneducated and dangerous charlatans. Caught between these contending lobbies, most state legislatures finally devised a compromise form of licensing which provided that chiropractors already practicing would be licensed either without examination or after passing a simple test. In many states, however, new chiropractors were required to pass more difficult tests. And in most states chiropractors were limited to spinal adjustment, and were denied the right to use most other forms of treatment such as drugs or surgery.

In lobbying for recognition under Medicare and other federal health programs, chiropractors stridently emphasize the fact that they are licensed—but studiously avoid mentioning that such licenses have been carefully hedged with restrictions intended to protect the public.

**Diagnosis by "Spinograph."** Unlike doctors of medicine, chiropractors maintain that it is of little or no importance to reach a diagnosis in terms of a specific disease. What they seek to determine is the misalignment of a vertebra or vertebrae, which they believe to be the basic cause of their patients' symptoms. In the early days of chiropractic, they sought such misalignments

by manual examination of the spine. Today the overwhelming majority of chiropractors utilize a large X-ray film, which is likely to impress patients. Medical specialists in radiology maintain, however, that the taking of such giant (36-by-14-inch) films needlessly exposes the body to dangerous amounts of radiation and that both the poor quality of such oversize films and their distorting effect make them of little or no diagnostic use.

A dramatic demonstration of the low diagnostic value of chiropractic "spinographs" took place a few years ago as part of an investigation (by the Health Benefits Plan of the National Association of Letter Carriers) of chiropractic abuses. Representatives of both the American Chiropractic Association and the International Chiropractors Association were invited to view 20 sets of X rays which had been submitted—with bills—to the Health Benefits Plan. According to the chiropractors who had taken them, each showed at least one misalignment, and in several instances more. Invited to point out the misalignments, the chiropractic representatives were unable to identify a single one.

**Tip of the Iceberg.** Most people who turn to chiropractors do so because they have been experiencing backaches. Many have previously been treated by doctors of medicine or osteopaths, only to have their pains recur. In many cases, back troubles do diminish under spinal

manipulation. But physicians maintain that this happens, not because of chiropractic treatment, but because some backaches (from muscular strains, for instance) tend to diminish with time.

Physicians also contend that many back pains are symptoms of more serious disorders, including coronary thrombosis, duodenal ulcer and cancer of the stomach. Diseases of the uterus and ovaries, of the liver, the kidneys, the prostate and the intestines may also manifest themselves through pain in the lower back. Since chiropractors are not trained to diagnose such severe conditions, their spinal adjustments may serve to delay proper medical care while the underlying disease worsens.

Physicians say, too, that chiropractic manipulation of the spine can be particularly dangerous for elderly patients, many of whom have previously developed osteoporosis, an extreme bone fragility resulting from loss of calcium with advancing age. In such cases, doctors assert, spinal adjustments by chiropractors can produce fractures of one or more vertebrae.

But chiropractors do not limit their ministrations to the treatment of backaches. According to a survey conducted by the American Chiropractic Association, more than 60 percent of the chiropractors reporting use their back-pressing techniques in the treatment of diarrhea, tonsillitis, hives, dermatitis, mental and emotional conditions, ulcers,

deficiency anemia and even chronic heart diseases. A substantial number do not hesitate to treat sufferers from diabetes, pneumonia, appendicitis, cerebral hemorrhage, leukemia and other forms of cancer.

The more cautious chiropractors usually decline to treat such conditions when they can recognize them. But numerous court cases attest to the fact that many chiropractors have no such insights or inhibitions. In one such case, for example, a patient with tuberculosis turned to a New York chiropractor who, although advised that the man was tubercular, prescribed a vegetarian diet, alternated with fasting periods of as long as 14 days. Later, the chiropractor sent his patient to a Florida colleague, who treated him in the same manner until he had wasted away to 80 pounds. Only then was he sent to a hospital, where he died within a few days. In 1964, both chiropractors were convicted of manslaughter for having caused the death of the patient through culpable negligence.

In another case, a California chiropractor was charged with felony murder after he had induced the parents of an eight-year-old girl to remove her from medical treatment by convincing them that he could cure her of cancer. The patient died after approximately two months under his treatments. Convicted of murder in the second degree, he appealed and continued to practice for more than five years until he was again convicted, in 1968. He is

serving a five-years-to-life sentence.

Chiropractors maintain that citing such court cases is unfair because they are comparatively rare and represent only the misjudgments of individuals. But physicians contend that such misjudgments, demonstrated in courts, are but the tip of an iceberg, and that only the laws of slander prevent them from citing many more.

**The Battle Ahead.** Before the Social Security Amendments bill comes up for passage by Congress, both the House Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee will hold hearings on all its details, including the clause that would provide for federal payment, out of tax revenues, for chiropractic X rays and treatments.

As before, numerous chiropractic spokesmen will present their case, in the hope of winning not only their immediate goal of recognition and payment under Medicare, but also their much wider and more lucrative aim of inclusion under

National Health Insurance. Once again, the American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association, the American Cancer Society and many other health organizations will make known their opposition to the chiropractic clause. So will consumer organizations, the AFL-CIO, the Consumer Federation of America and, most significantly, the National Council of Senior Citizens, which seeks to protect its 2.5 million members—all Medicare beneficiaries—from treatments it regards as "worthless and mortally dangerous."

One group, however—the millions of people whose tax dollars are at stake—will not be heard from unless the rest of us play our part by letting our Congressmen and Senators know, by letter or telegram, where we stand.

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