



Chiropractic: Addressing the Looming Provider Shortage

For decades, the workforce in America's health care system has been slowly shifting from primary care providers to specialists. In 2008, the Institutes of Medicine (IOM) issued its long-anticipated report on the state of the nation's health care labor force, "Retooling for an Aging America: Building the Health Care Workforce." This 312-page study paints a bleak picture from the patient's point of view. The message is simple: Going into the future, projected numbers of trained health care professionals will fall far short of the minimum needs.

In February 2008, the General Accounting Office (GAO) testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, stating, "Over a 50-year period, government and industry groups' projections of physician shortfalls gave way to projections of surpluses, and now the pendulum has swung back to shortfalls again." Additionally, the Council on Graduate Medical Education's January 2005 report projected a "likely shortage of physicians in coming years."

Aging baby boomers are one key reason why workforce experts believe shortages will befall primary care and other specialties, making it more difficult for Americans to access medical care. Another 2008 IOM report indicates there will be a lack of geriatricians when the 78 million baby boomers begin turning 65 in 2011. And with fewer medical graduates choosing primary care, the strain is only expected to worsen.

So what can be done to deliver the quality of care patients expect? How will health care increase its focus on the importance of prevention and public health measures? The solution involves more than simply producing more doctors; it requires educating primary care medical physicians and other caregivers in new collaborative ways. It means learning more about and utilizing licensed health care providers such as doctors of chiropractic (DCs), who are qualified to help take the load off the hard-pressed traditional primary care physicians (MDs & DOs). Doctors of chiropractic have the education, training and skills to perform as first-contact, portal-of-entry, primary care providers, and are especially adept at caring for patients with neuromusculoskeletal conditions such as back pain, neck pain and headaches, as well as extremity and soft tissue conditions...which cause many millions of Americans to call their PCP every year.

Consider:

- According to a May 2009 article in the *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, lower-back problems are considered the most prevalent pain complaint affecting the general population, with a reported lifetime prevalence of up to 75 percent.
- According to R.A. McKenzie in his book *The Lumbar Spine*, lower-back pain is one of the most common conditions for which individuals seek medical care.
- In the journal *Spine* in 1995 and 1996, it was estimated that between 40 percent and 85 percent of people with lower-back pain have consulted health care professionals about their pain.
- As the sixth most expensive medical condition in America—according to a February 2008 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*—the cost of spine pain was \$86 billion in 2005, an increase of 65 percent since 1997.

- According to January 2009 data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, more veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan sought treatment for musculoskeletal ailments than any other physical malady.
- According to the *Medical Care Utilization Estimates for 2006*, neck pain, headaches, and extremity and soft tissue conditions were leading reasons for patients seeking care. (National Health Statistics Reports, Number 8, August 6, 2008)
- According to a Duke University study published in 2001, cervical spine manipulation was associated with significant improvement in headache outcomes in trials involving patients with neck pain and/or neck dysfunction and headache.
- The results of a randomized-controlled trial published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2003 show that patients with neck pain recovered faster when treated with manual therapy (spinal mobilization) as compared with patients treated with physiotherapy (mainly exercise) or general practitioner care (counseling, education and drugs). Moreover, the total costs of the patients treated with manual therapy were about one-third of the costs of physiotherapy or general practitioner care.
- According to a study published in the *Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics* in 1995, spinal manipulative therapy is an effective treatment for tension headaches.

The high economic costs of back pain, neck pain and headache diagnostics and treatment--and their direct impact on the efficiency of our nation's workforce, as well as their significant consumption of primary care physician resources--should encourage us to make changes that will reduce the time and money spent on these conditions. There is a solution: collaboratively **redistribute** some of the patient workload to professionals such as doctors of chiropractic, who possess the education and training necessary to conservatively care for patients with these conditions, both acute and chronic.

Doctors of chiropractic are also well qualified to counsel and educate patients on health promotion, prevention, risk-avoidance strategies, proper diet, appropriate physical activity and to refer to other specialties when appropriate. Their approach to health care enables patients to return to work sooner and to reduce the statistical likelihood of re-injury or recurrence of symptoms as well as related dysfunction and disability.

In the face of this pending shortage of health professionals, there are licensed doctors of chiropractic practicing in every state (almost 70,000 nationwide) who have the education, skills and experience to reduce the burden on other providers while offering high-quality, cost-effective, easily accessible care to American citizens who suffer from painful acute and chronic conditions.

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