

Chiropractic manipulation, with a deliberate “double entendre”

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D D Palmer, the founding father of chiropractic, once stated that “95% of all diseases are caused by displaced vertebrae, the remainder by luxation of other joints”.¹ This conviction is still shared, at least to some degree, by chiropractors today. It is thus understandable that chiropractors would treat children and adolescents for a range of conditions. A recent survey of UK chiropractors, for instance, suggested that 10–58% of the respondents considered conditions like infantile colic, childhood asthma, enuresis, otitis, epilepsy, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or cerebral palsy to be “effectively treatable by chiropractic methods”.² Similarly, a survey conducted in 2004 by the General Chiropractic Council showed that a sizable proportion of UK chiropractors’ patients are children.³ To the best of my knowledge, there is no reliable information, however, to define the proportion of British children treated by chiropractors.

The British Chiropractic Association states that “chiropractic may help you and your baby recover from any birth trauma... There is evidence to show that chiropractic care has helped children with the following symptoms: asthma, colic, prolonged crying, sleep and feeding problems, breathing difficulties, hyperactivity, bedwetting, frequent infections, especially in the ears”.⁴ If we google “children/chiropractic” we obtain 5 870 000 websites (date 12 January 2009), many of which display similar enthusiasm. Table 1 summarises quotes from the first five that appeared on my screen. They

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imply that chiropractic thinking is out of line with modern medicine and suggest that virtually every child should see a chiropractor. Crucially they also totally negate any risks that have been associated with chiropractic spinal manipulation⁵ or with following chiropractors’ advice, for example about immunisation.⁶

But is there any sound scientific evidence to demonstrate that chiropractic is effective for paediatric conditions? Sadly the answer is largely negative. Rigorous trials in this area are scarce and the few studies that do exist tend to show that “the addition of chiropractic spinal manipulation to usual medical care provided no benefit”.⁷

Despite this lack of convincing evidence, recent articles—some of which appeared in respected, mainstream journals—seem to indicate the opposite. In 2005, two chiropractors authored a systematic review of chiropractic manipulation in paediatrics.⁸ They found 166 discrete documents that met their eligibility criteria but only nine of these related to clinical trials. These authors concluded that “health claims...regarding the application of chiropractic manipulation...for paediatric health conditions are...supported by low level of evidence”.⁸ Considering that the authors admit “no critical appraisal of the evidence was undertaken”, and that much of the included trials were flawed, negative or conflicting, this conclusion does seem to be grossly over-optimistic. The same authors recently published an update of their review and found “no substantive shift in this evidence”.⁹ In 2007, another group of chiropractors reviewed the data on chiropractic care for non-musculoskeletal diseases, several of which were paediatric conditions.¹⁰ They concluded that the “chiropractic care...

[provides] benefit to patients with asthma, cervicogenic vertigo, and infantile colic”.¹⁰ Most recently Kemper *et al* stated that “few randomized controlled trials have demonstrated significant benefits of chiropractic practices among pediatric patients”.¹¹

Considering the actual evidence, these statements might need correction. I would suggest a dramatically different conclusion: the best evidence available to date fails to demonstrate clinically relevant benefits of chiropractic for paediatric patients, and some evidence even suggests that chiropractors can cause serious harm to children.^{5 6} In the interest of vulnerable children, we should not be manipulated by misleading statements to the contrary.

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Table 1 Quotes from the first three websites located

Website	Quote
www.mychiropractic.co.uk/chiropractic_children.html	Chiropractic...is a great way to help restore children's health in a natural way... Chiropractic care...is effective in treating: nose and throat infections, childhood reflux, colic, breastfeeding difficulties, failure to thrive, recurrent infections, tummy upsets and many other childhood conditions.
www.isischiropractic.co.uk/chiropractic_children_treatment.html	Problems can develop within your child's spine during birth or at other times during childhood...[they] can lead to symptoms such as: colic, otitis media, bedwetting, sleeping and feeding problems, poor coordination, adolescent scoliosis, torticollis, hip pain, knee pain, headaches, back pain, asthma, chest infections, behavioural problems, Scheuermann's disease... Early assessment of your child's spine may help to prevent some of the above symptoms.
www.chiroweb.com/mpacms/dc/article.php?id=41406	Common childhood disorders can also sometimes indicate a spinal problem. Persistent earaches, sore throats, colic, headaches, bedwetting, and growing pains are but some of the more common problems for which parents bring their children to the chiropractor... Because the scientific literature identifying the benefits of spinal manipulation for children's problems is not extensive, it is understandable that medical doctors may not be up-to-date in this specialized area.