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The Future of Chiropractic and Health Care

What Is Chiropractic?
For much of its history, chiropractic has struggled to clearly articulate what it is.

Too often the profession has defined itself by what we do not do: "without drugs and surgery" or by what a chiropractor is legally permitted to do within a particular state, province or country. Terms such as "natural," "holistic" and "alternative" are frequently used, yet those terms themselves can mean vastly different things to different people.

Regulatory and licensing agencies serve important purposes in establishing minimum standards of competency and protecting the public. At the same time, regulatory structures naturally tend to preserve established models. New paradigms rarely emerge comfortably from systems designed around existing ones.

What we commonly call a "health care system" is largely organized around disease. A person develops symptoms. The symptoms are evaluated. A diagnosis is made. A treatment is prescribed and the case is managed. Even alternative and so-called "holistic" caregivers also strive to treat diseases and disorders with natural remedies or protocols.

This model has produced extraordinary accomplishments. Modern medicine's ability to respond to trauma, infection, acute disease and life-threatening emergencies has saved countless lives and should be acknowledged. So-called "natural and holistic" approaches, including chiropractic, have also relieved numerous conditions and pathologies.

But its success in disease treatment does not mean that the same model is sufficient for understanding every dimension of human health. Treating disease, whether by pharmaceuticals or natural modalities, is NOT the same as creating health and vitality.

The dominant biomedical model has largely been built upon reductionism. It is the process of understanding something complex by breaking it into smaller and smaller components. Reductionism has been enormously valuable scientifically. It has allowed us to understand cells, receptors, genes, biochemical pathways, organs and disease mechanisms with extraordinary precision.
But there is a limitation. A human being is more than the sum of those pieces.

We can understand every component of a violin and still know nothing about the music. Likewise, we can know increasingly more about the individual parts of a human body without necessarily understanding the dynamic, adaptive, self-organizing human being in whom those parts exist.
Even many contemporary approaches to wellness and "biohacking" remain grounded in the assumption that health must primarily be engineered from the outside—that something must continually be added, removed, measured, manipulated or optimized.
What if another perspective is possible?

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Vitalism: Recognizing the Intelligence of Life
At the roots of chiropractic is vitalism.

Vitalism, in a contemporary chiropractic context, can be understood as the recognition that there is a vital life force in all living organisms that allows that organism to possess inherent capacities for self-organization, self-regulation, adaptation and healing that cannot be adequately understood by examining its individual parts alone.

This does not require rejecting science. Quite the opposite. It invites us to expand the questions science asks. It offers a perspective to look at the whole rather than just the parts. Rather than trying to treat disease, it honors the fact that the body is inherently intelligent and is striving to be healthy and vital. It asks why the body might have done this; it asks what can create a better expression of life, what input can be given to the body that allows it to function better, what allows a greater degree of adaptability, what allows the body to organize better.

Instead of viewing the person as a collection of independent systems, we can recognize the inseparable relationship among neurology, physiology, psychology, environment, relationships, movement, nutrition, sleep, stress, meaning and human experience.

The body is not simply a machine. It is a living, highly complex, interdependent, adapting system.
This perspective does not mean that every symptom is beneficial or that intervention is never necessary. Symptoms can signal serious pathology and must be appropriately evaluated. But symptoms can also be part of an organism's attempt to protect, compensate, heal or adapt.

From Pathogenesis to Salutogenesis
Salutogenesis is a term that was coined and the concept developed by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky. While "pathogenesis" asks about the origins and mechanisms of disease, "salutogenesis" asks about the origins of health, what allows human beings to move toward greater health and well-being, even while encountering stress and challenge.
Imagine a health care system that invested as much energy and resources in the creation of health as it does in the treatment of disease.

What allows a person to adapt better to their environment? What creates resilience? What allows someone to move, breathe, sleep, connect, and function more fully? What environmental, neurological, emotional, and social conditions allow life to flourish? What increases a person's capacity rather than merely decreasing a symptom? Those questions lead us toward a very different health care system.

The Health Care Provider of the Future
The "disease care" system will continue to define the health care system if the education of caregivers does not change.

The shift in approach (from sickness/pathogenic care to wellness/salutogenic care) is more complex than it may appear.

The mechanisms of identifying "better health and vitality" today remain dependent on a reductionistic, mechanistic model of the human body and the human being. I propose that we need a new language, new research models, and a different system of evaluation.

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This change in approach begins by recognizing that the role of the caregiver is NOT to see what is broken or wrong with a person. It begins by asking how we can create more synergy, more alignment, more efficiency, more life expression. The systems of clinical evaluation will ask: What allows a fuller breath? What creates more ease? What increases awareness, coherence, and resilience? What adds joy? What creates connection? What allows peace?

Physiological measurements will extend beyond "normal" findings and move towards improved adaptability, response ability, self-awareness, and higher tone.

The education of future health professionals must create a more integrated understanding of the human being. They must also appreciate how thoughts, emotions, meaning, intention, and perception influence physiology, behavior, and the lived experience of health.

Students will learn about complexity and systems thinking. They will explore the relationship between the nervous system and the living environment. They will understand movement, breath, sleep, nutrition, connection, purpose, and the many factors that influence our ability to adapt.

Most importantly, they will learn to see the person standing before them, not simply the diagnosis contained within them. They will recognize the "being," not just the human.

Technology and artificial intelligence will become significant parts of the evolution of health care. AI is becoming remarkably proficient at processing data, identifying patterns, interpreting images, and generating differential diagnoses. Tomorrow's health professionals will have access to more information than any generation before them could have imagined.

Yet technology cannot replace the profound human experience of being seen, heard, touched, and cared for.
Education will cultivate curiosity, presence, empathy, humility, and the ability to listen. It must teach future doctors to recognize that they are not standing outside the healing process as technicians repairing a defective machine. They are entering into a relationship with another living human being.

Chiropractic is at a crossroads
Will the chiropractic profession move towards limited medical practice of treating conditions with conservative procedures and protocols, or will it be the leader in defining salutogenic care and vitality? I believe chiropractic has an extraordinary opportunity at this moment in history.

The unique service of chiropractors is to evaluate the nervous system, the system that plays the central role in coordinating physiology, perception, movement, adaptation, and our interaction with the environment. **The phenomenon that chiropractors address is a vertebral subluxation.**

Vertebral subluxation, viewed through this lens, is not simply a static lesion or something that must be "treated." It represents a dynamic interference to the system, impacting the individual's capacity to fully adapt. Its significance is not merely that something is wrong, but that it may offer the chiropractor a window into where and how meaningful input can be introduced into the system.

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The Future of Health Care

The experiences of recent years, including the COVID era, exposed many dysfunctions and the limitations of our existing health systems. They also revealed how deeply questions of health are intertwined with personal responsibility, community, environment, trust, communication and human connection.

We have an opportunity to move beyond a model in which people primarily experience themselves as potential victims of disease toward one in which they recognize their own capacity to participate in the creation of health and vitality.
Our current health economy is largely structured around the diagnosis, management and treatment of disease. Financial incentives, reimbursement models and institutional structures naturally reinforce that orientation. A system organized around creating greater health, adaptability and vitality would require very different measures of success.

Chiropractors have an opportunity to be leaders in this new paradigm. Consumers (patients) need to be actively engaged and ask their caregivers for more.

More than 40 years ago, a baby named Chelsea opened my eyes to something I have never forgotten. What happened that day was about far more than the resolution of a symptom. It awakened me to the extraordinary capacity for life, adaptation and change that resides within every human being.

I have spent much of my life since then witnessing that capacity.

Perhaps the future of chiropractic and of health care itself lies not in developing ever more ways to control the human body, but in learning how to better understand, support and honor the intelligence already present within it.

The future is in our hands. Let us create a future of greater vitality, connection, adaptability and love.

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