

Back Pain Patients Cheer Chiropractic

By Arlan Fuhr, DC

I remember years ago, *Consumer Reports* published an article that was not particularly favorable to chiropractic. The profession was up in arms over the coverage, but the problem was that we really didn't have any data to counter the claims made. Since then, we have been gathering data on a more routine basis, and have been participating in research and clinical trials to support our methods. Now, it seems the tide is changing, and I truly believe our commitment to collecting data has given us proof of our efficacy that can no longer be ignored by patients, other practitioners and the public at large.

Fast forward to 2009, when the May issue of the highly-respected *Consumer Reports* featured an article titled "Relief for Aching Backs," which ranked the top five treatments for back pain according to a recent patient study. This was not a small survey, as it was based on feedback from 14,000 consumers who suffered from back pain and ranked practitioners based on overall satisfaction. [A complete review of this survey appeared in the May 20 issue of *DC*. See "Consumer Reports Survey Rates DCs Higher Than MDs" online at www.dynamicchiropractic.com.]

According to the survey, 59 percent of patients were "highly satisfied" with the chiropractic care they received (tops among all health care professionals) also disclosed that 54 percent of patients surveyed found exercise helpful, making it the top self-help measure, and 58 percent of respondents wished they had done more exercise to strengthen their backs.

The survey reached beyond practitioner care and assessed feedback from those who had undergone back surgery. Only 60 percent of those surveyed were completely or very satisfied with the results of their back surgery, compared with 82 percent who were satisfied after a knee or hip replacement. More than half of the back surgery patients reported at least one problem with recovery, finding it lengthier and more painful than they anticipated; 16 percent indicated their back pain didn't improve following surgery, and 50 percent said it grew worse. Interestingly, the *Consumer Reports* article also suggested that if back surgery is recommended, the patient should seek another opinion from a nonsurgical practitioner.

Having practiced for nearly 45 years, my clinical observations mirror the findings of this study. In most cases, when treating a post-surgery patient suffering from back pain, the patient has been willing to do virtually anything to avoid another surgery because of the challenges associated with the surgery and recovery.

Back in the days when double laminectomies were common, I typically observed a four-year span between surgery and recurrence of pain on the next level above the surgery. When I saw a 5-inch scar on a new patient, I would ask the patient if they had undergone a double laminectomy about four years prior, and the patient would be amazed by my accuracy. Invasive surgery does not always solve the issue, and the postsurgical problems sometimes take years to manifest themselves.

The last part of the *Consumer Reports* article warned about taking narcotics to treat back pain. The survey found that more than 50 percent of those given a prescription received a narcotic. While clinical trials have shown that narcotics reduce low back pain more than a placebo, the side effects - including respiratory issues, depression and significant gastrointestinal problems - can be extremely troublesome.

With so many repercussions associated with drugs and surgery, no wonder patients surveyed were so highly satisfied with chiropractic treatments for back pain. I'm not saying that drugs are ineffective or that surgery is unnecessary, but simply that patients are recognizing they may have other options. We know through research that the low-force approach to chiropractic adjusting is safe, comfortable and effective in many cases, without the risks of side effects or complications from major surgery.

This was, without a doubt, one of the most even-handed articles about chiropractic that I have ever read in the popular press. Because it centered on patient feedback, and reflected opinions from the people who trust our methods and speak the truth, our approach to healing was treated equitably. And that's good news indeed.

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