

Health Insights Today

A SERVICE OF CLEVELAND CHIROPRACTIC COLLEGE

September/October 2009, Volume 2, Issue 5

With an Eye Toward the Future: Cleveland Chiropractic College's New Research Agenda

By Daniel Redwood, D.C.

Over the past generation, chiropractic's strides toward full and fair inclusion in the health care system have relied on the existence of an ever-expanding research base that confirms the effectiveness of manual adjustment for spinal and other joint structures, using scientific standards accepted by all health disciplines. For the profession to build on past success, new research areas must now be explored. At both the Kansas City and Los Angeles campuses of Cleveland Chiropractic College, a new research agenda designed to meet the needs of the next generation of chiropractors is now in full swing.

The Right Team

An effective research program starts with hiring highly qualified people with the vision and expertise to accurately assess genuine research needs and to pursue cutting-edge projects that do not duplicate the efforts of other colleges. In recent years, Cleveland Chiropractic College has assembled such a team, under the steady leadership of Cheryl Hawk, DC, PhD, Cleveland's Vice President for Research and Scholarship. Dr. Hawk works closely with James Brantingham, DC, PhD., and Mark Pfefer, RN, MS, DC, who serve as Directors of Research at the Los Angeles and Kansas City campuses, respectively. Together, these research trendsetters have a track record of high-quality published research. They have forged a new path for the College, focusing on chiropractic approaches to lower extremity conditions, geriatrics and prevention.

Dr. Hawk is a highly respected chiropractic researcher. She explains the importance of a robust and sustained research program in terms most practicing chiropractors will understand: "With the emphasis on evidence-based practice and documenting outcomes, if you don't have research, it's going to be harder and harder to be included by third party payers. That's really the bottom line and why everyone is realizing that research is important." Hawk, who also chairs the Scientific Commission of the Council on Chiropractic Guidelines and Practice Parameters [CCGPP], has direct experience in using research to safeguard chiropractors' practice rights, as part of CCGPP's rapid response team, which fields an ongoing flow of requests from doctors facing refusals of coverage for some procedures by insurance companies. The rapid response team provides research evidence to substantiate procedures which are questioned.

Focus on Lower Extremity, Geriatrics and Prevention Research

Recognizing the need for Cleveland College to carve out a unique research niche rather than following in the footsteps of other colleges (some of which have specialized, for example, in low back pain or headache research), Drs. Hawk, Brantingham and Pfefer noted the lack of chiropractic research on older people, the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. Among the most important priorities in geriatric healthcare is maintaining the ability to live independently. This requires being to walk and perform other bodily movements in a healthy fashion and, most importantly, to prevent falls that can result in disabling fractures. Such fractures are a key factor in patients' needing to enter assisted living facilities or nursing homes.

Cleveland's research leadership team saw three potentially important research themes emerging. First, because disorders of the ankle, knee and hip exert a major influence on ambulation and may also be a critical factor in avoiding falls, investigating chiropractic's effects on lower extremity conditions should be a central focus of the College's research agenda. Second, while virtually all chiropractic research to date has focused on evaluating

Health Insights Today

A SERVICE OF CLEVELAND CHIROPRACTIC COLLEGE

September/October 2009, Volume 2, Issue 5

Page 2

treatments, possible preventive effects of chiropractic adjustments should also be included among the areas to be studied. Third, because too little research in both chiropractic and medicine has looked closely at the specific needs of elderly patients, geriatrics was identified as a key area of emphasis for Cleveland researchers.

To jump-start the enhanced focus on geriatrics, starting on July 6, 2009, all Cleveland Chiropractic College – Kansas City Health Center patients age 65 or older will be enrolled in research studies. This will significantly enlarge the number of subjects available to participate in future chiropractic research projects.

Selected Recent and Current Research Projects

Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics, chiropractic's flagship scholarly research journal, has accepted for publication a CCCLA study on chiropractic management of patellofemoral pain syndrome (pain around or behind the kneecap made worse by activities). According to Dr. Brantingham, Director of Research at CCCLA, "this project was incredibly useful for developing the ability of the clinic and the research department to work together." As is so often the case, success breeds further success. With a track record on lower extremity research, Brantingham and colleagues were able to secure a grant from the UniHealth Foundation in Los Angeles to study chiropractic management of hip osteoarthritis. This is a fully powered clinical trial (with enough patients for results to potentially reach statistical significance) that is currently underway at CCCLA. In addition, another proposal for a trial on knee osteoarthritis is currently under consideration for a grant from another Los Angeles area foundation.

Other recent research that has been published (either by CCCLA faculty alone or jointly with Durban University of Technology in Durban, South Africa or the University of Surrey in Guildford, England) includes another trial on knee osteoarthritis, a prospective case series on meniscus injuries as well as the first studies of chiropractic adjusting for shoulder impingement, adhesive capsulitis and rotator cuff tendinopathy.

At CCKC, three studies have recently been completed. In one, patients over 65 in the Brookside and Overland Park clinics were observed over time, assessing the effects of chiropractic care on balance and function. Another, done in Raytown, Missouri, evaluated chiropractic care for residents of independent living and assisted living facilities. The third project is a neck pain and dizziness study.

Research at the two campuses of Cleveland Chiropractic College is opening new doors for the profession and the College. Recent projects, particularly the lower extremity studies in Los Angeles and geriatrics studies in Kansas City, are the first steps in what promises to be a multi-year, in-depth exploration of topics of great importance to the chiropractic profession and the patients it serves.

Cleveland Chiropractic College Research

CURRENT EXTRAMURAL FUNDING

Foundation for Chiropractic Education and Research, Kansas City Campus: (Principal Investigator: Hawk)
Pilot Study: Does Chiropractic Care Decrease Fall Risk in Older Adults? \$112,000 (2007-2009)

UniHealth Foundation, Los Angeles Campus: (PI: Brantingham)

Pilot Study: A randomized clinical trial comparing two manipulative protocols to assess changes in pain, ROM, quality of life, cost, and risk for falls in subjects with hip osteoarthritis. \$100,000 (2008-2010)

Health Insights Today

A SERVICE OF CLEVELAND CHIROPRACTIC COLLEGE

September/October 2009, Volume 2, Issue 5

Page 3

FCER, Kansas City Campus (PI: Hawk)

Consensus Process to Develop "Best Practices" Document for Chiropractic Care for Children \$96,695 (2008-2009)

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Health Insights Today

A SERVICE OF CLEVELAND CHIROPRACTIC COLLEGE

September/October 2009, Volume 2, Issue 5

Page 4

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Health Insights Today

A SERVICE OF CLEVELAND CHIROPRACTIC COLLEGE

September/October 2009, Volume 2, Issue 5

Page 5

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