

Look Beyond Symptoms For The Full Story

by Brian D. Jensen, DC

I don't need to see a doctor for my backache. Sure, it hurts right now, but the pain will go away if I just take it easy for a couple of days."

That's a fairly typical initial reaction for many people experiencing low back pain; however, we as chiropractors understand that pain is a bodily distress signal indicating something is occurring behind the scenes that needs to be addressed. What's equally distressing is the conclusion that occasionally pops up in medical research: some treatment protocols are no better than no treatment at all, based on the fact that symptoms gradually improve on their own. This conclusion should be disturbing to chiropractors because of the influence it has on the culture of health care and is – by its very nature – intellectually dishonest if used in the wrong context.

Understanding The Whole Picture

A recent research paper investigated the efficacy of a particular treatment regimen for patients with low back pain. The conclusion stated that the treatment had positive results, because pain was diminished, function was restored in a relatively short period of time and there was minimal need for expensive pharmaceuticals or surgery. This shouldn't come as a shock to you or anyone else in our profession: chiropractors have had over a century of practical clinical experiences like this, in addition to tremendous patient satisfaction.

The interesting part of the study was the peer reviews of this article. Many respondents felt the research

was not sufficient, because it did not prove the treatment was more beneficial than the placebo or no treatment at all. The rationale for this argument was that low back pain is self resolving with no treatment, given an adequate amount of time. Remember that this is research and should not be confused with what is medically necessary or clinically appropriate. Research is used to determine appropriate outcomes for treatment protocols based on necessity.

If we allowed this logic to be taken to the extreme, it would essentially preclude the need for health care intervention for anything that presents as pain. It would pretty much be "game over" for chiropractic – end of our profession. For example, for a large percentage of patients that experience heart-related chest pain, the symptoms are self resolving. According to the self-resolving symptom model, this would constitute a successful outcome even if the mechanism of symptom suppression was a fatal heart attack. That is an extreme interpretation of the model, but it illustrates the point: we need to be interested in more than the symptoms to understand the whole picture of health.

Investigate To Find The Cause

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tom, an indication of imbalance, trauma or inflammation. It is the neurological result of chemical mediators that initiate an impulse that we interpret in our sensory cortex. Our search is for the cause. The human body is filled with righting mechanisms that are programmed in our DNA. If the blood sugar drops a sufficient amount, receptors in the brain trigger the mechanism to urge us to eat. Thirst mechanisms work to keep us from becoming dangerously dehydrated. Inflammation is a mechanism of homeostasis as is perspiration or shivering.

The body's production of endorphins as a result of pain or stress is part of the balancing act. Fluctuations in blood pressure and respiration are adaptive as well. Balance is the adaptation to proprioceptive input that keeps our eyes level with the horizon and allows bipedal ambulation against the constant pull of gravity. As long as the human body is upright, and ambulatory, there is some degree of balance at work.

The list of righting mechanisms is extensive. It validates the fact that

our genetic programming dictates movement toward homeostasis, as if there were an internal gyroscope keeping us on course.

Focus On Foot Stability

In the course of your practice you have seen patients come to your office whose only desire is to get out of pain. No one is better at assisting the body to accomplish that than you – a chiropractor. Our challenge and our duty is to educate the patient about proper function, whether there are symptoms or not.

You have to talk to your patients about the many degenerative processes that take place – in the absence of pain – over long periods of time. Chronic postural distortions are one of the most common causes of degeneration of spinal and extremity joints, especially the lumbar spine, knees and hips. These distortions often begin with subtle imbalances in the feet and translate rotational distortions up

the kinetic chain through the knees, hips, pelvis and spine. A simple way to catch these distortions before they become major problems is with an evaluation of the feet.

Evaluating the feet as part of every new patient examination can reveal the cause of many preventable conditions and the symptoms they create. Stabilizing the feet with custom-made, flexible orthotics is the beginning of creating a stable pelvis and spine which will enhance the care you provide by reducing the incidence of degeneration and the symptoms that diminish the quality of your patients' lives.

Pain, Pain, Go Away!

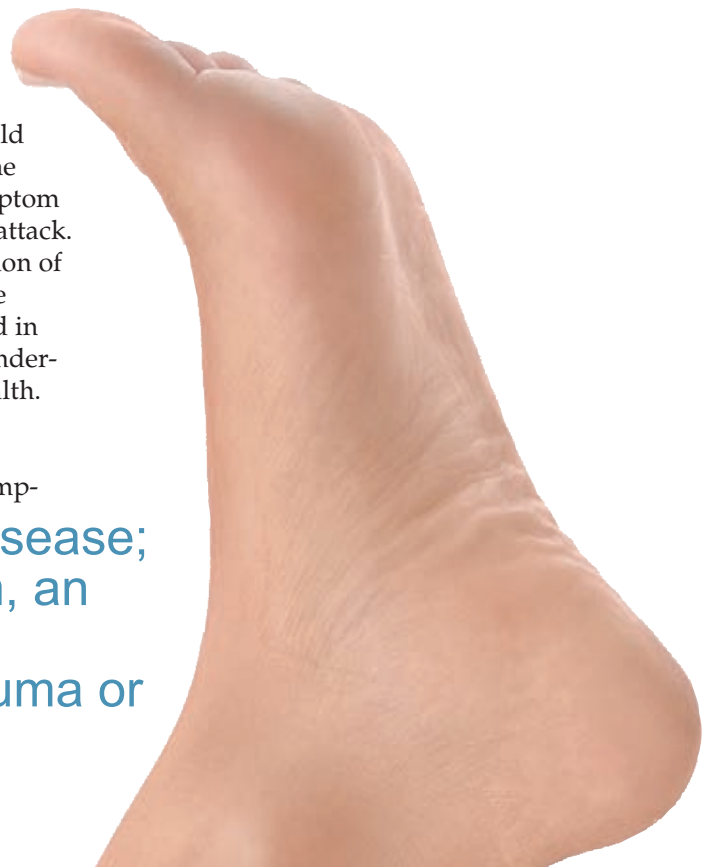
"My pain will just go away on its own if I take it easy for a while."

This may be true for the short term, but we recognize the fallacy in this statement for overall, long-term

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health. Our goals should be to teach that pain is a symptom of a bigger issue and to use chiropractic and – when needed – custom-made orthotics for postural support to help those in pain feel and perform better, both now and for years to come.

About the Author — Dr. Brian Jensen graduated from Palmer College of Chiropractic in 1987. He speaks on a wide variety of topics, including orthotic therapy, posture, structural preservation, breaking free of the medical model of health care, and innovations in nutrition. Dr. Jensen welcomes your comments at brian.jensen@footlevelers.com.



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