[IMAGE]

On-The-Job Chiropractic

By Joseph J. Sweere, DC, DABCO, DACBOH, FICC

Regardless of your occupation, the physical demands of your job - whether you're sitting at a desk all day, lifting heavy objects or running from location to location - can take a serious toll on your body. That's where chiropractic care can help. In this interview with **Timothy Wegscheid, DC**, find out why he became a chiropractor and how he provides chiropractic care and ergonomic assessments to employees at a unique place of business: the Minnesota Zoo.

Interview By Dr. Joseph Sweere

Dr. Wegscheid, briefly tell us about yourself and how you decided to become a doctor of chiropractic.

Thankfully, my mom is an RN. I say 'thankfully' because she kept a 'concussion journal' for me to track my major head injuries growing up. Those concussions were mainly due to the fact that my neighborhood was almost entirely boys and we always played rough. Sadly, I suffered 10 or 11 of these major concussions while I was still a very young child.

My introduction to chiropractic came about as the result of the after-effects of my last severe concussion at age 12. I fell backward off a set of bleachers and landed on the top of my head, axially compressing my neck and completely knocking me out. After this injury, I experienced severe, constant headaches. We tried several allopathic treatments with minimal relief. It was at that time that a family friend suggested seeing a chiropractor.

neck pain - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark After reviewing X-rays, it was apparent (even to a 12-year-old) that I had some serious structural issues in my neck following that injury. I had a reversed cervical curve, anterior head carriage, muscle spasms throughout my neck, and subluxations that were visibly present on the X-rays. My chiropractor took the time to explain all of these things, which impressed me greatly.

After my first adjustment, I couldn't believe the difference it made: instant reduction in pain and an increase in the mobility of my neck. With follow-up care, I found myself feeling better and better.

After my initial care for these injuries, I continued with chiropractic off and on throughout high school. It was during this time that I shredded my right ankle stepping in a hole while playing soccer. After X-rays ruled out a fracture, the orthopedic surgeon told me I was essentially guaranteed the need for reconstructive surgery. He said it would be about a year before I would be running on it full-bore. This would have eliminated all opportunity to partake in the three sports I played my senior year.

I was told by the orthopedic surgeon that I might as well start PT until surgery could be performed. I knew a good sports chiropractor just down the road and consulted him about my messed-up ankle. He wound up adjusting the ankle, and that, combined with acupuncture, ultrasound and a lot of deep-tissue work, put me in the position of never needing the reconstructive surgery. Because of his care, I was able to go on to have a lot of success in those three sports that year. Thankfully, these are lifelong memories [I wouldn't have] had it not been for the gift of chiropractic in my life.

Describe how you became interested in occupational health and applied ergonomics.

After I graduated from Northwestern College of Chiropractic in 1996, my father telephoned my office for an appointment, as he had strained his lower spine. He had been a lifetime employee at 3M (Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing), and I remembered visits to 3M's headquarters a couple of times as a kid. I was amazed at how large their headquarters were. They had everything there: a medical facility, a pharmacy and even a place to get your shoes shined and your hair cut. So, in reply to my dad's request, I responded with, "Why don't you see your chiropractor at work?" He responded, "What chiropractor?"

This led me to ask the most basic of questions: "Why don't you have a chiropractor on-site?" His response was, "That's a really good question ... why doesn't 3M have a chiropractor on-site?" The innocence of that question, along with the obviousness of the benefits of chiropractic, planted the seeds to figure out why more businesses don't have chiropractors on their staff. It was with this thought and motivation that I enrolled in Northwestern's diplomate educational program in occupational health and applied ergonomics.

I understand you are currently involved with an exciting project with the Minnesota Zoo. Please tell our readers about this and how this opportunity arose.

The Minnesota Zoo is owned by the State of Minnesota. It opened in 1978 and is located in my home town of Apple Valley. The zoo has around 170 full-time employees year-round, and during the summer, its main tourist season, with the addition of student workers, interns and other temporary workers, that number swells to around 450. The zoo also has over 500 volunteer workers, the largest volunteer corp of any zoo in the nation.

I was employed at the zoo right after high school and continued to work there throughout my undergrad and chiropractic college years, and even another six years of weekends after graduating from Northwestern. I was an employee of the zoo a total of 14 years. After graduation from chiropractic college in 1996, I had a number of fellow employees request adjustments while I was at the zoo.

After several months of these requests, which were toward the end of my occupational health diplomate program, I asked the head of safety and security for the zoo, Mr. Ken Weisenburger, if he would be open to having me provide on-site chiropractic care for the zoo's employees. He immediately understood the potential benefits of doing so, and with his assistance, we were able to implement an on-site chiropractic program. This was in 2002, and with me then becoming an independent contractor (as a chiropractor) with the State of Minnesota, I had to resign my position with the zoo as an employee. To my knowledge, I was and perhaps still am the first chiropractor to serve as an independent contractor for the State of Minnesota.

Describe the major occupational health services you are providing within this relationship.

The zoo's employees are divided into two groups: the physical labor portion (zookeepers, grounds crew, maintenance, etc.) and the more sedentary portion (administrative, guest services, etc.). As it turns out, an approximately equal distribution of workers has chosen to see me. The zoo supplied me with an exam / treatment room, in which I provide chiropractic care, acupuncture and rehab for any neuromusculoskeletal symptoms the workers experience. If the condition is found to be a work-related, care is billed through the state workers' compensation insurance. If not, the employee's personal insurance is billed.

What have you found to be the greatest challenges / primary obstacles you have had to overcome in marketing your professional services within this group?

As mentioned above, marketing my services with the management team was never a challenge. I think the most difficult obstacle was the fact that the zoo's employees are there first and foremost for the animals, along with raising awareness of the impact they are having on our environment and promoting conservation

efforts around the world. These people are workaholics and many aren't very focused on their own health.

It was challenging to get these individuals to understand why chiropractic services would be provided on-site [because it focused] on the *employees* rather than the animals. It took a while to get certain individuals to understand that if a main zookeeper is out due to an injury, then a 'substitute' zookeeper who, by definition, doesn't have the same relationship with the animals, would have to do the job. Thus, the health of the animals would benefit as well from keeping as many regular staff on-site and as healthy as possible.

Having a long-standing, personal relationship with the zoo and its employees was crucial in my ability to feel comfortable in approaching them with an idea for on-site chiropractic. It also helped that a number of the zoo's employees were already successfully treated patients in my family practice very near to the zoo facility.

Do you feel that providing occupational health and ergonomics services, and assisting businesses and organizations with their health, wellness and safety programs, has a bright future for appropriately trained doctors of chiropractic?

I think the sky is the limit. I feel that the majority of employers don't fully realize the costs that are associated with injuries for their employees. I think they get the raw / up-front costs, but there are so many hidden or indirect costs they are largely unaware of. Once they are enlightened to the cost savings of on-site chiropractic care for their employees, the improvement in worker morale and the satisfaction ratings, a lot of facilities will employ appropriately trained chiropractors to fill this need.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Every community has employers that could use our on-site and other occupational health services. One of the many benefits is the fact that the overhead is exceptionally small, and both employers and employees actually want us there – many of them just don't know it yet. Another benefit is the fact that some of your time can be used doing ergonomic assessments, thus lessening the physical stresses on workers' bodies, resulting in longer employment lifetimes.

So, does your chiropractor provide chiropractic care and ergonomic assessments at your place of business? If not, you may want to pass this article on to your employer and suggest they contact your chiropractor. It's a win-win-win situation for employers, employees and your DC.

Joseph Sweere, DC, DABCO, DACBOH, FICC, is a professor in the Chiropractic Clinical Sciences Division and chairman of the Department of Occupational Health, College of Chiropractic at Northwestern Health Sciences University.

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