

Science, Philosophy and the Gentle Art of Letting Go

When we entered the Palmer School of Chiropractic more than half a century ago, we were taught, “Chiropractic is a science, philosophy and art of things natural; a system of adjusting the segments of the spinal column by hand only, for the correction of the cause of dis-ease” It didn’t occur to us back then to question that definition: after all, the chiropractic course consisted of *science* subjects, “chiropractic *philosophy*” and clinical *arts* appropriate to our scope of practice—physical diagnosis, spinal analysis and manual adjusting. Anything else was considered mixing, and therefore none of our business: we were *straight* chiropractors.

The *mixer* schools had different ideas and curricula to match, preparing their students to practise midwifery, physiotherapy, minor surgery, venisection and other “medical” procedures. Some American states even required these competencies for licensure, though most jurisdictions did not allow chiropractors so qualified to use them in practice.

Though the straights and the mixers had little to do with each other, they had some important things in common: they adjusted the spine skilfully with apparently excellent results, they had confidence in the ability of the body to heal itself, and they were thoroughly convinced they were right.

The *Chiropractic Text Book* from which we learned the principles of the profession we were entering had not changed fundamentally since R. W. Stevenson first compiled it in 1927. With insufficient reliable evidence to persuade us otherwise, and an impressive body of anecdotal evidence that chiropractic helped people with nearly every complaint imaginable—often after the best medical care had failed—we accepted these propositions at face value.

Chiropractic research as we know it today was still in the future, though we were aware that B.J. Palmer kept meticulous records on every patient treated at his private clinic (including medical diagnoses on entry and discharge), and Carl Cleveland II had embarked on a study of artificially induced subluxations in rabbits. We were suspicious of “medical research” that cast doubt on what we believed to be true, and looked forward to the day when chiropractors would have the money and expertise to do their own cutting-edge research to vindicate what we had been taught.

Five decades on, as chiropractic and related research has expanded our knowledge base, the worldview and expectations of mainstream chiropractors have become more realistic. Most have come to recognise that research is not about proving what we believe or disproving what we don’t; it is about discovering what is true through systematic investigation; that the affiliation of the investigator is less

important than the quality and relevance of the research. Interdisciplinary research teams including chiropractors, virtually unthinkable fifty years ago, are no longer unusual, and without such collaborations much of the work that is informing modern chiropractic practice would have been impossible.

Today there are more research articles relevant to chiropractic published in a year than we expected to see in our lifetime, but the more we learn as a profession, the more apparent it becomes that we have barely scratched the surface. We who at twenty-something thought we knew everything we needed to know have lived long enough to be humbled by the enormity of how much more there is to unravel and excited by the possibilities unleashed by every discovery and advancement, however small.

We are saddened, however, that a part of our profession—and perhaps a tiny part of each of us—fights a rearguard action when research findings cast serious doubt on a theoretical model we had thought was serving us well or demonstrates that under controlled conditions chiropractic manipulation for a particular condition does not produce the results we imagined it might. Why take it so personally when our cherished notions are challenged? Will denial or rationalisation change the truth?

It was only a few hundred years ago that it seemed naturally right to believe the earth was flat; only heretics believed otherwise. Then the great navigators proved beyond any doubt that the heretics were right. The discovery didn’t change the shape of the world; it just made more of it accessible. Eventually we had to accept that even Newtonian physics—one of the great gifts of the Age of Enlightenment—does not adequately explain how matter behaves. Would we now choose to turn our backs on the gifts of quantum physics?

The chiropractic philosophy we learned all those years ago provided us with a useful framework for a practice that provided help and relief to millions of human beings that had come to us as a last resort, and it continues to be a valuable resource. Nevertheless, any conceptual framework, even one that has served us well in the past, can easily become a prison if it blinds us to truth. Will we allow stubborn insistence on a false premise deprive us of the gifts of discovery?

There is no shame in being shown to be wrong: it is simply a cue to refine our perceptions and behaviours to conform with reality. This is an indispensable part of growing up, and our still-young profession has a lot of growing up to do.

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