

Chiropractic and Migraine

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The science, art and philosophy of chiropractic in its present form dates back to 1895, but it has been documented since the time of Hypocrates.

The purpose of chiropractic is to try and get your entire body's physiology working at its optimum level. It does so by approaching the central nervous system, which controls and regulates every function in the body down to a cellular level.

The brain stem is a major factor in how migraine develops. It's a massive junction box between the neurons. The signals from the neurons in the cortex of the brain travel throughout the spinal cord to every part of the body. The brain stem is a very dense junction, there's a very narrow canal in the upper neck area, which allows the spinal cord to transmit in and out of the cranium. As there's very little space so even a slight distortion to any of that can have an affect over time.

The proportion of what goes on in the brain and how it relates to the rest of the body has a massive effect on everything.

The spasm and then dilation of the arteries relating to the brain stem is usually what's implicated when we develop a migraine. This is what sets off that powerful headache reaction and everything else that goes along with it.

Most people know that migraine is not simply a headache phenomenon. There's an awful lot more involved in it.

Chiropractors look for a phenomenon called subluxation, which is a minor distortion or a change of position of any of the vertebrae in the spinal column, the pelvis or even the cranium itself. The cranial bones move even throughout adulthood. We see children developing and see how the shape of their head changes. This also happens in adults but at a much slower rate.

Scientists believe that there's a migraine pain centre located in the brain stem. Blood vessels become inflamed causing characteristic pain and other migraine symptoms.

In order to keep this process in check, treatment is of the essence.

There are many factors to look for in relation to migraine. Familial trait is a big one so when a migraineur comes for treatment, I always ask them about their siblings and parents. I may get them to go home and bring in a photograph of themselves in years past and their siblings also to see if they have distortions in the same way. For example by looking at posture. Posture is a good way of looking at the spine or central nervous system – there's a lot more to posture than 'sit up straight after you've finished your dinner'. There are certain curves that should go in different places in the body. If they get distorted it causes a neurological reaction. When these neurological reactions get out of control or are there for a long time our body loses its ability to adapt as easily as it can.

We live in a chronically stressful world. Look at work, home etc - the pace of life is very different than what it was even 5 or 10 years ago.

If we're not able to adapt to all of these stresses that are thrown at us then we will struggle and suffer in some way. How that suffering manifests is different for everybody as we grow up differently, have different traits etc.

The arteries are very dense within the spinal cord itself. When we talk about dilation and constriction of blood vessels relating to the central nervous system, we're talking about an interruption in blood-flow and when such interruptions are related to our brain or our brain stem there's an immediate physiological reaction, which can have widespread effects throughout the body.

The brain controls, regulates and monitors how each organ system works. Some turn up secretions of enzymes, functions of organs others turn them down. That's all been implicated when we have nausea or vomiting related to migraine.

Just to give you a little bit of background on how the body actually works...

When we're healthy we have approximately 70 trillion cells. How does a cell know what to do in relation to the rest of the cells in the arm or the leg or wherever? It knows because of the brain. Nerves travel all the way through the body and send signals both to and from the cell so the brain knows what's going on, the cell knows what's going on and all the others in between do too.

When our cells are working well, then we're functioning well. When we're functioning well we get through life with some level of ease. If something interferes with that then we're not functioning as well as we could, therefore, we're malfunctioning, which causes some sort of disease. Over time that affects our health -we may die of disease or suffer a long time with a painful chronic condition.

The purpose of chiropractic is to see if there's an interference at some point in any of these areas that's causing malfunction and correct it. Then the bodies own powers of recovery kick in, which determines whether we recover or not. We're all born with the potential to heal. Whether we're talking about migraine or cancer or an injury on the playing field, we're all born with some level of ability to heal. It depends how far the condition is gone that determines whether we recover or not.

Every 90 – 100 days our cells are replaced i.e. brain cells, hair cells, liver cells etc. If the signals are getting through and the cell's replaced like the previous one then we remain in a state of health, but if there's interference and malfunction over time and the cell does not function at 100% or is not replaced at 100% this can result in chronic disease or a chronic condition such as migraine.

With that in mind chiropractors do not actually treat diseases. What we attempt to do is treat the cause of most diseases and distortions within the body.

Obviously we've got to know our physiology and neurology before we can tackle anything but the founder of chiropractic states this from the beginning - chiropractors do not treat diseases, they adjust the wrong which creates disease. They've discovered that the human body is a sensitive, complex piece of machinery run by mental impulses of the mind or spirit.

So there is a deep philosophy as well as the art and science behind why somebody would attend a chiropractor.

I myself get adjusted very frequently – I don't always need to be adjusted but I get checked frequently. Basically what goes on beneath the pain threshold is

what determines whether we're healthy or not. With obvious discomfort, you should get checked out to see if anything is going on - but much happens outside the pain spectrum and this is what people are really not fully aware of.

The study of conventional medicine is a great library and legacy of knowledge of diseases, pathology and chemistry on what causes mankind to be ill and ultimately can suffer death from. The paradigm behind chiropractic is that we want to actually study health, physiology and what causes mankind to live and express themselves fully.

Lets look at a number of case studies. I've recently set up a new practice. We've been running since Christmas. We have 42 active migraine sufferers in the practice and have had over 200 who have attended us at some level.

Case Study 1

The first case study is Mrs. N. She is 41 years old and she's been with us since May. She was diagnosed with migraine when she was 13 years old at the onset of menses, which is very common. She has had migraine throughout her life since that time.

Hers is a very standard type of migraine. She usually gets an attack a couple of days prior to menstruation. Sometimes she can get them in between as well. She experiences light sensitivity and so has to go into a dark room. She gets the typical temporal headache, fatigue, nausea and dizziness. Occasionally she experiences vomiting but not always. Sometimes attacks last one or two days and she can't work during a migraine, which is very relevant to the topic we're discussing today. Her work is office and computer based and she describes it as medium stress.

She's gone through her triggers knows what's good for her and what's not. She was never a drinker or smoker which is great. She has 2 daughters one is a sufferer and one is not.

She had one accident ten years ago. She didn't think much of it at the time and had no treatment, although she had ongoing minor discomfort for about 3 months. She has tried a broad spectrum of medication over the years, both over-the-counter and prescription but she doesn't like taking it if she can help it.

We did a full postural exam, x-rays, and our specific tests and found that her line was sitting off centre. The lower neck was in good alignment but the upper portions were sitting forward. She's also got, what we call Phase 2 Degeneration, in her lower neck. This probably started before the accident - it can take up to 10 years for that kind of wear to show on an x-ray.

Her posture is translated to the right, tilted and rotated. Think of what that's doing to the spinal cord - there's a kink in it somewhere. It's not a lot, but over time, it has a big effect. She went through a 12-week course with us - it takes 90-100 days for a cell to change and replace so 12 weeks amounts to one full healing cycle. So with someone who has a chronic condition we would take them through at least one healing cycle and then see how they get on long-term. Its one thing to get rid of a headache or two but we want to see progressive improvement for her.

She finished her 12 weeks and showed improvement. The first migraine appeared on target but thankfully it was reduced in severity so that was a good start. It's always encouraging for somebody to see that there's a change early.

She went on holidays in the middle of her treatments and I was worried about how she would get on but she didn't get a single attack during the three weeks she was away with her family.

Now she's signed up for another 12 weeks of maintenance care, which is at 2-week intervals so we're beating the anticipated migraine cycle by two weeks at a time. It will be interesting to see how she's doing at the end of 24 weeks/6 months - that's 2 healing cycles. At that point we may take a review x-ray. For now though, she's doing well and she's back at work.

Case Study 2

A 32-year-old Garda, who plays Gaelic Football. You could say being a Guard brings a fair level of stress at times, as does Gaelic Football. In fact the football is the source of most of his injuries. He's had numerous knocks, bumps and twists.

He has a number of areas of concern. He's got a right translation but he's also got lateral bending and a mild scoliosis in his thorax. He's got degenerative phases throughout his lower neck area. He's got a 9-year history of migraine attacks every 6-8 weeks but no regular pattern. During attacks he may have some dizziness, nausea and fatigue along with the temporal right-sided headache but doesn't vomit.

It can take 5 years for phase 1 to show on an x-ray but if that's left untreated it can progress in the wrong direction so basically we're working on his whole spine but focusing on the areas that are furthest off.

He hasn't been able to play throughout this whole season so he has signed up for 6 months at a time. We're going to review him every 6 months but part of the purpose of what I do in the practice is educate the patients that chronic conditions are things that do not disappear quickly.

With all those healing cycles to go through he's got lots of 100 days to get through before we would be expecting the steady correction of his spinal column and ultimately an improvement in his migraine.

So every 100 days this healing cycle is going on. I explain to people that we need to actively maintain our central nervous system throughout our lives from the beginning, as most people aren't aware of this.

My own daughter was checked about 3 minutes after birth to see if she had a subluxation. Thankfully she didn't. She's had a few since, as she's fallen over like kids do but has had it corrected. It only takes a very gentle pressure to adjust the spine throughout the first 20 years of life.

The point is that if you get a good start and your cells are replicating from the beginning, by the time you get to adulthood you're pretty strong and you're innate powers of recovery are doing well. I didn't discover chiropractic until I was 20 and by then I had phase 1 degeneration in my first x-ray. However that has recovered.

I was also diagnosed as a migraineur at age 18. I had two migraines and they faded away. I would like to have known if I was subluxated at the time. I didn't find out but there was a good chance that I was. To be honest, looking back, I think migraine was a false diagnosis so that means that we have to be very active in our history and presentation.

I'm going to go through a procedure we do in our office in regards new patients. It's a phenomenon that's often referred to as retracing. It relates to our 100-day cell replication cycle i.e. the law of cure, this is Herring's law. This is one of the basic foundations of recovery.

When we start to recover through something we can often get phantom discomfort, different emotions come up when we go through a migraine again or whatever it might be. We revisit things that have happened to us - car accidents are a good one. The lady in the first case study I outlined was in a car crash and whenever she has a long drive she gets a migraine. It doesn't take a big step of the imagination to see that she's in the same position for a long time that she was initially traumatised in. This would be very typical in not just migraine sufferers but people with other chronic conditions too.

But when we go from acute to chronic form symptoms, we move from more superficial tissues to deeper ones. In terms of the central nervous system that's a move from the less vital organs to the more vital ones. So this is how chronic disease starts to impact on health - its starts as something peripheral or something relatively simple and gets deeper over time.

When we start to recover, we start working from the inside out. We're not just trying to make patients well again we want to see our patients improve over a lifetime, not just get rid of a condition. So often there is continual migraine while the person is receiving chiropractic - there is no quick solution it involves an ongoing process.

I just want to outline one final example. There's a massive rise in coronary heart disease and breast cancer. Bear in mind that there are cancer cells formed in all of us every day but when we're working well, we're able to kill them off, recycle the cell and pump out another good one. It can take up to 11 years for breast cancer development to show a lump the size of a pencil lead. It can take up to and over 15 years for a woman to be able to detect it physically. These cells are not replicating properly and that can have serious consequences.

Chiropractic isn't a cure for migraine or breast cancer or anything. It has never claimed to be but when your physiology is working well you have a much better chance of beating any stresses or any pathogens that enter your body, be that a common cold or anything else. My purpose as a chiropractor is not to cure migraine but to detect and correct subluxations within the system so that your body can rid itself of whatever ailment it encounters.

We do not rely on drugs or surgery, some people that are still with us need their medication still, but the majority have been able to reduce it.

There are chiropractors in every major town in Ireland. Its worth getting checked - you may not have subluxation, but most people do at some stage and by addressing the underlying cause of any distortion within the central nervous system you are working towards better health in the long-term.

Thank you very much.