Editorial: Is the Tail Wagging the Dog?

As educators of the chiropractors of the future, we have the multifaceted responsibility of preparing our students to provide high-quality health care. We provide students with an introduction to a large and ever-expanding body of factual information, and hopefully help them learn how to critically evaluate new information. We try to help them develop an integrative understanding of the body of knowledge required to engage in meaningful clinical decision making. We help them develop the practical skills required to render care to those in need, and the personal interaction skills required to work with the public. Attempts are made to prepare our students to survive in an ever-evolving business climate, where changes such as managed care and evolving models of collaborative care pose new challenges and opportunities. As the profession and the health care environment evolve, it is necessary and desirable that chiropractic education also evolves accordingly.

As the information base of relevant scientific information has expanded, as clinical practice has become more complex consistent with those advances, and as the rapid increase in complexity of the health care business environment has continued, chiropractic curricula have evolved by simply expanding. Students have been made responsible for more and more information and skills, and our programs have gradually reached the point where students are exhausted mentally, and are pushing information into their brains so rapidly that insufficient time for reflection and synthesis is available to them. While significant improvements in educational methodology have helped to alleviate these effects, these improvements have not been sufficient.

This situation has been recognized at some institutions, where much discussion has occurred over whether the length of the curricula should be increased in order to decrease the intensity of the programs. It is probable that absent the significant economic risks posed to the chiropractic colleges by increasing the length of the programs, some would have taken this path already. It is my belief that what would actually be desirable is not a reduction in program intensity through increasing the time required to obtain a chiropractic education, but instead a reduction in intensity through a reduction in content.

There is an incredible amount of time and resource in the chiropractic curriculum devoted to the acquisition of factual trivia that are irrelevant to chiropractic. These materials are deemed necessary in large measure because they appear on the NBCE examinations. They appear on the NBCE examinations because they are included in the curriculum. This constitutes a self-perpetuating cycle of wasted time and resource in chiropractic education, on material which may in large measure be an “intellectual fossil” created by the basic science examinations that some states instituted and subsequently abandoned earlier in the 20th century. Students waste thousands of hours “learning” meaningless and irrelevant information in order to

complete an examination process in many ways equally irrelevant, and then happily forget the material and never think about it or encounter it again. Many will spend hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars on extracurricular preparation courses in order to learn which key words or phrases indicate a correct test response relating to subject matter that they do not understand or care about.

Fortunately, this problem is subject to remediation by the chiropractic education community. We determine the content of our curricula, and we also determine the content of the NBCE examinations. We can collectively determine for ourselves what is or is not relevant to a quality chiropractic curriculum. While such a discussion is bound to lead to disagreement over some subject material, there will doubtless be topics recognized almost universally as being either required core content or extraneous. My own education involved countless hours of human dissection, including intricate details of intracranial anatomy, the abdominal vascular system, and the fine details of the interior of the heart and other topics of extreme importance to a prospective surgeon. However, no dissection of any synovial articulation was included. Students at every chiropractic college memorize the Kreb's cycle without any real understanding of its significance; the material constitutes about 5% of the chemistry section of the NBCE part I examination; and it is clinically irrelevant, as it functions properly in every living cell. I have never heard of a chiropractic histologist or chiropractic pathologist.

While it is possible that chiropractic education can be qualitatively improved with a reduction in some areas of content, it would be a mistake to eliminate all content areas that may not relate directly to clinical practice. While most, if not all, of our students begin their chiropractic education intending to become clinicians, many become enamored with other aspects of the profession, such as education, research, and politics. It is crucial that students be exposed to diverse areas of content relevant to the profession, so that those with the inclination to serve the profession in nonclinical capacities may have the opportunity to discover and nurture those tendencies. We would not be wise to limit chiropractic education to strictly vocational training.

This issue of *The Journal of Chiropractic Education* is being initially distributed at the annual conference of the Association of Chiropractic Colleges. It is my hope that faculty reading these remarks will seize the opportunity presented by the conference to discuss these issues face-to-face with their peers, and begin the process of determining collectively whether, and how, our curricula and standardized evaluation of chiropractic students should be revised.

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