

# Research Agenda

## Vertebral Subluxation Research: An Agenda to Explore the Epidemiology of Vertebral Subluxation and the Clinical Outcomes Related to Management

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### Abstract

**Background:** Since its inception the chiropractic profession has been mired in debate regarding its clinical application – specifically surrounding the concept of vertebral subluxation. Despite over 100 years and some effort at developing a research agenda, the factions that embrace vertebral subluxation as a clinical entity warranting epidemiological study continue to be confronted with basic questions regarding the existence, measurement and clinical meaningfulness of vertebral subluxation. These questions form the basis for a proposal to develop a Research Agenda and related program centered on vertebral subluxation in order to elucidate the clinical manifestations of the founding principles and tenets of the chiropractic profession.

**Methods:** The vertebral subluxation research agenda will involve defining the current state of the science, art and literature base to determine what is known and not known about each research objective. This will allow for the most efficient use of limited resources. The agenda centers on five areas including: operational models, measurement, epidemiology, clinical strategies and health outcomes.

**Discussion:** In order to accomplish the goals and objectives of the research agenda, a long term project is proposed that includes creating and supporting the next generation of subluxation centered scientific researchers to carry out these projects. The research program will need to identify and continuously update a manifest of research projects directly relevant to the agenda and will need to involve a large segment of subluxation centered groups, organizations, associations, vendors, practitioners and patients. The development and implementation of central data repositories will need to be undertaken and the program and its results will need to be marketed to chiropractors, students, patients, legislators, policy makers and the general public through an integrated campaign.

**Conclusion:** This research agenda seeks to validate the profession's focus on the location, analysis and correction of vertebral subluxation and position chiropractic as a vitalistic, scientific, evidence-informed clinical practice. This research is expected to assist the profession in gaining a higher degree of respect, understanding and acceptance in the health care marketplace, the scientific community and among the patients it serves. Current evidence suggests that vertebral subluxation is detrimental to human health and function and as such chiropractors who manage subluxation feel an ethical and moral obligation to screen and educate the public on what it believes is a significant public health threat. To that effect this agenda also includes the marketing of the agenda itself and the results of its research endeavors in an effort to increase utilization of vertebral subluxation screening and management.

**Key words:** *Chiropractic, vertebral subluxation, research agenda, epidemiology, vitalism, evidence informed practice.*

## **Vertebral Subluxation – *the Problem***

Since its inception the chiropractic profession has been mired in debate regarding its clinical application – specifically surrounding the concept of vertebral subluxation. Despite over 100 years and some effort at developing a research agenda, the factions that embrace vertebral subluxation as a clinical entity warranting epidemiological study continue to be confronted with the following questions regarding research and the clinical meaningfulness of vertebral subluxation:

- What evidence is there that vertebral subluxations exist?
- What evidence is there that vertebral subluxations can be measured using valid and reliable means?
- What evidence is there that vertebral subluxations lead to adverse health outcomes?
- What evidence is there that vertebral subluxations can be reduced and/or corrected?
- What evidence is there that reducing/correcting vertebral subluxations leads to improved health (or other) outcomes?

These questions form the basis for a proposal to develop a Research Agenda and related program centered on vertebral subluxation in order to elucidate the clinical manifestations of the founding principles and tenets of the chiropractic profession.

For over one hundred years, various factions within the chiropractic profession have pursued a health model rooted in vitalism. This centers on viewing the body as a largely self-healing, self maintaining energetic system. Further, these factions of the chiropractic profession embrace holism in terms of caring for the person through the analysis and reduction of vertebral subluxation versus focusing on symptom relief.

The reasoning for the application of these principles focused on vertebral subluxation is as follows:

- The body is a self regulating, self maintaining organism;
- The nervous system controls and coordinates all functions of the body;
- The spine and vertebrae house and protect the nervous system;
- Vertebral subluxations can occur and interfere with the function of the nervous system;
- Reducing and/or correcting vertebral subluxations allows the nervous system to function better and allows the fullest expression of life.

This model posits that vertebral subluxation in and of itself is detrimental to the fullest expression of life. Therefore, clinical strategies towards identifying, preventing, arresting, reducing and correcting vertebral subluxation form the basis of clinical management for those that practice in this model.

The generally accepted causes of vertebral subluxation include physical, chemical and emotional stress. Worldwide we have adopted a life of poor health behaviors regarding food choices, lack of exercise and stressful lifestyles. We also live in an

ever-increasingly polluted environment that assaults our health on many levels. All these factors conspire to compromise the nervous system and by extension the immune and endocrine system. This cascade outlines the neurobiological mechanisms by which vertebral subluxations lead to adverse health and other outcomes. This cascade and its related clinical corollaries can be studied using the scientific method while being informed by the philosophical underpinnings of the profession.

## **Subluxation, Philosophy & Science**

Major advancement in the field of vertebral subluxation research has been hampered by poor organization and lack of research infrastructure. Research in chiropractic is generally grossly under funded with regards to other health professions, e.g. medicine and dentistry, and the focus of major funding in the field has been largely medical endpoints (e.g., musculoskeletal disorders, neck pain, back pain and headaches, etc.) and not the spectrum of positive health outcomes and salutogenesis experienced by those practitioners whose clinical focus is vertebra subluxation.

Because of its rich, vitalistic philosophical underpinnings there has always been some trepidation towards research within these factions of chiropractic. Indeed, this trepidation was strengthened with the advent of the evidence based movement within health care. However, this disdain is based on mainstream distortions of what exactly constitutes evidence based practice coupled with a skepticism of all health related research as being contained within the medical model.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Evidence informed practice simply incorporates the practice member's personal desires, their clinical state and scientific evidence when making clinical decisions. There is nothing inherently medical or anti-chiropractic regarding this approach and in fact such approaches actually support historical chiropractic attitudes regarding personal autonomy.

This research agenda seeks to validate the profession and position chiropractic as a vitalistic, scientific, evidence-informed clinical practice. The more research, the greater the chance the profession will have of gaining a higher degree of respect, understanding and acceptance in the health care marketplace, the scientific community and among the patients it serves. It is imperative to make these new research advancements available to the public, other health professions, and to legislators in order to promote and to systematically advance the field of subluxation centered chiropractic through the initiation of favorable public health policy. Current evidence suggests that vertebral subluxation is detrimental to human health and function and as such chiropractors who manage subluxation feel an ethical and moral obligation to screen and educate the public on what it believes is a significant public health threat. To that effect this agenda also includes the marketing of the agenda itself and the results of its research endeavors in an effort to increase utilization of vertebral subluxation screening and management.

## The Research Agenda & Plan

The vertebral subluxation research agenda will involve defining the current state of the art and literature base to determine what is known and not known about each research objective. This will allow for the most efficient use of limited resources. The agenda centers on five areas:

1. Research focused on the description and identification of the various operational models of vertebral subluxation. (Do vertebral subluxations exist?)
2. Research focused on the validity and reliability of measures to identify and characterize vertebral subluxation. (Can vertebral subluxations be identified through valid and reliable means?)
3. Research on the epidemiology of vertebral subluxation including its incidence, prevalence, morbidity and mortality. (Who is subluxated and do vertebral subluxations lead to adverse health outcomes)
4. Research on clinical strategies for preventing, arresting, reducing and correcting vertebral subluxations. (Can vertebral subluxations be reduced?)
5. Research on health outcomes following management of vertebral subluxation. (Does reducing/correcting vertebral subluxations lead to improved health outcomes and enhance salutogenesis)

In order to accomplish the goals and objectives of the research agenda, the following long term project is proposed.

1. Create and support the next generation of subluxation centered scientific researchers to carry out these projects;
2. Identify and continuously update a manifest of research projects directly relevant to the agenda;
3. Involve a large segment of subluxation centered groups, organizations, associations, vendors, practitioners and patients;
4. Develop, implement and exploit central data repositories;
5. Market the project and its results to chiropractors, students, patients, legislators, policy makers and the general public through an integrated campaign.

The initial phase of this project spans 20 years and will center on identifying, developing, training and supporting the next generation of chiropractic researchers who are committed to exploring the science surrounding the vertebral subluxation.

This aspect of the project involves funding scholarships for post DC students to go on to get their Masters and/or Ph.D and in exchange they will complete the projects from our manifest. The degrees will be in the areas of Public Health, Maternal and Children's Health, Prevention Science, Epidemiology, the Sociology of Health, Health Policy and Health Economics.

## GOALS & OBJECTIVES

### Goal Number One:

To encourage and support the development of the next generation of subluxation centered chiropractic researchers.

#### Objectives

- A. Fund 20 scholarships over 20 years for post DC students to go on and get advanced degrees.
- B. Develop an educational and outreach program to reach potential candidates.
- C. Develop a subluxation centered research team and related infrastructure.
- D. Create centers for clinical research to support the training of practitioner-scientists in the area of subluxation centered chiropractic.

### Goal Number Two:

To elucidate the nature of vertebral subluxation.

#### Objectives

- A. Complete research focused on the description and identification of the various models of vertebral subluxation.
- B. Complete research focused on the validity and reliability of measures to identify and characterize vertebral subluxation.
- C. Complete research on the epidemiology of vertebral subluxation including its incidence, prevalence, morbidity and mortality.
- D. Complete research on clinical strategies for preventing, arresting, reducing and correcting vertebral subluxations.
- E. Complete research on health outcomes and salutogenesis following management of vertebral subluxation.

### Goal Number Three:

Increase utilization of vertebral subluxation screening and management.

#### Objectives

- A. Determine current utilization rates from reliable sources.
- B. Develop an evidence informed, worldwide, public health communications plan centered on the need for screening and management of vertebral subluxation.
- C. Develop a related training program in public health communications for practicing chiropractors.

**Goal Number Four:**

To improve health policy and regulation in relation to the management of vertebral subluxation.

**Objectives**

- A. Write policy on the federal and state level that explicitly includes and protects the management of vertebral subluxation and the public health.
- B. Assist health policy experts to implement subluxation centered health policy.
- C. Provide evidence in regulatory environments to ensure the adoption of regulations that support subluxation centered practice and the public health.
- D. Provide evidence in regulatory environments to ensure the repeal of regulations that are detrimental to subluxation centered practice and the public health.

**Goal Number Five:**

To help ensure the survival of the clinical practice of locating, analyzing and correcting vertebral subluxations.

**Objectives**

- A. Develop and compile the epidemiological and clinical evidence regarding vertebral subluxation and its detrimental effects on populations.
- B. Develop and provide the epidemiological and clinical evidence regarding the vertebral subluxation and its detrimental effects to chiropractic educational institutions, trade organizations and practitioners.
- C. Provide the evidence needed to develop mentoring, coaching, business training, and the development and provision of information and resources for chiropractors, trade organizations and associations to communicate the necessary public health messages for a subluxation-centered public health agenda.