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SPINE & SPORTS: Chiropractic versus opioids

Opioids are based on the drug morphine, the painkilling chemical extracted from the poppy plant substance called opium. Prescription opioids include codeine and oxycodone, and heroin is the illicit, highly-potent derivative of morphine.

It is well understood how opioids kill pain and though effective, all opioid drugs have adverse effects that can lead to addiction. Chiropractic care is a safe and effective option for treating both acute and chronic pain with no risk of addiction.

Chiropractors utilize a variety of drug-free treatment methods with the potential to reduce or eliminate the need for opioid medicines, but many barriers prevent people from receiving chiropractic care as a treatment option.

Addiction can occur as the brain develops tolerance to repeated use of opioids, making it necessary to take higher doses to achieve the same level of pain relief, but also worsening the withdrawal symptoms. Once addicted, opioid users are left with awful, sick feelings of withdrawal, and many users will do anything to feel better, including taking dangerously high doses.

A significant percentage of users, including those cut off from their prescription medications, turn to heroin, a cheaper and widely available street drug which can easily slow breathing to a halt. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health reported opioid overdose deaths have risen since 2011, and in 2014 we lost about 1,300 people to fatal overdoses, many of whom started with opioids prescribed by a doctor.

For those with acute, debilitating pain such as from surgery or major injury, opioids may be the only way out. Nevertheless, it is wise to get off them as soon as possible. But there's one way to avoid addiction to opioids: don't ever start. For those with chronic or recurrent pain, nonopiate drugs such as gabapentin or ibuprofen are options, but like all drugs they have side effects. Even common nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen can increase the chance of stroke or gastrointestinal bleeding.

Viable opioid alternatives are available such as chiropractic, physical therapy, acupuncture, massage therapy, exercise training and mental health counseling. However, in our current health care system, many people are channeled to care pathways that often lead to more drugs. Patients are typically treated or referred based on insurance coverage alone. Gatekeeping patient care providers who are trained in internal medicine may not consider alternative treatments to medication.

Visits to doctors of medicine and numerous rounds of physical therapy are often covered by insurance as are costs for unnecessary imaging, expensive medical interventions and multiple opioid prescriptions. Yet there's little to no coverage for providers of acupuncture or massage therapy, widely varied coverage for mental health care and for chiropractic. It's a crap shoot with many health insurance plans, burdening the patient with unreasonably high co-payments or offering no coverage at all.

Doctors of chiropractic have always been at the service of those in pain. Research has proven that chiropractors can provide effective care for those with musculoskeletal conditions including headaches and spine pain, common conditions for which opioids are often prescribed. A recent British Medical Journal study demonstrated that back pain patients who first saw a doctor of chiropractic or physical therapist were less likely to start taking opioids. Why chiropractic is not a core benefit on all health plans and why chiropractors are not on staff in all medical facilities remains concerning.

The chiropractic profession has great potential within our health care system to better serve those with musculoskeletal pain and the public deserves fair access through their health plans and medical centers in order for it to be effective. Chiropractic methods cannot kill pain like morphine, but helping patients get off opioids, or better yet, to never start down that path, will save health care dollars and lives.

Scott Gillman is a doctor of chiropractic in Natick, in practice since 1991. He is also a chiropractic sports medicine specialist with a Diplomate from the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians. He can be reached at 508-650-1091 or through www.drgillman.com.



Scott F. Gillman