

DCs Aid Colorado Firefighters

Forest fires in Colorado in 2002 destroyed vast natural resources and hundreds of structures, and left millions of dollars' worth of damage in their trail. The Colorado Chiropractic Association announced that in an "overwhelming demonstration of goodwill," over 100 DCs from that state gave "time, talent and equipment" to firefighters and support personnel.

Three doctors of chiropractic were instrumental in organizing the statewide volunteer effort: David Boyd of Castle Rock, working with officials of Douglas County, and setting up a makeshift clinic at the fairgrounds; John Warner of Colorado Springs, working with the Salvation Army at the Lake George Fire Department; and Thomas Garcia of Bayfield, working directly with firefighters and their families.

The Hayman Fire

Realizing the need for treatment for many personnel, Dr. Boyd emailed the Colorado Chiropractic Association and Colorado Wellness Alliance. Doctors around the state started calling in to donate their services and to ask what they could do. Over 70 doctors called in; 24 were able to come to the fire command center to adjust. Many were local; some came from as far away as Fort Collins and Pueblo. One doctor even traveled 250 miles to donate help.

"I heard that a command post would be set up at the fairgrounds in Castle Rock, three blocks from my office and visible from my back door," explained Dr. Boyd. "My first night working at the site was on Sunday, June 16. I treated 31 firefighters between 5 and 10 p.m. Many of them kept saying, 'I can't believe you are here,' and thanking me. It was Father's Day, and many were thousands of miles from their homes, fighting the fire and risking their lives."

Dr. Warner contacted the local Salvation Army to volunteer his services. "Great, come on up," came the response. Dr. Warner set up three tables and related equipment in the garage of the Lake George Fire Department.

"I've treated plenty of times outside my office, but nothing like this!" exclaimed Dr. Warner, who is in his third decade of practice.

It was also a new experience for Dr. Boyd, a 1982 Palmer graduate: "I asked myself, 'What can I do for the firefighters, at least as a chiropractor?' I called a longtime maintenance patient, the emergency preparedness director for the county, and left him a message. Two days later, he brought me to the command center and introduced me to a staff member and the sheriff's deputy in charge of volunteers. He said he'd have to clear my working with them with the 'feds,' because FEMA had just arrived. As I got ready to return home, he said to me, 'You're in!' I set up my portable table near a group of massage therapists at the Salvation Army mess hall areas.

"Though we were miles from the fire, there was a lot of smoke and haze in the air. Initially, we were in a tent outside the dining hall, and two chiropractic equipment suppliers from Denver (Medical Directions and Medical Specialists) each delivered an adjusting table on the second day, so we did not have to adjust on portable tables."

The cause of many of the firefighters' ailments was evident to Dr. Boyd: "Besides working in over-90-degree weather with the fire all around, each had on a special long-sleeved shirt and long pants, and typically carried a gallon of water; food; a survival tent; and hand tools that weighed 40-45 pounds. Some carried extra water packs weighing 100 pounds over rough and hilly terrain.

"We saw strain from things such as overexertion; lifting; and riding in the fire trucks from California, Oregon, Washington and elsewhere. Many personnel had been under chiropractic care during previous years. Many had old injuries or conditions that hadn't been taken care of. Probably 60 to 70 percent had experienced no chiropractic treatment before."

Just as Dr. Boyd met incredulous fire crews, so did Dr. Warner: "We heard it hundreds of times," he affirmed. 'I can't believe you're here,' and 'This is the first fire that I have worked on where there have been chiropractors and massage therapists.'"

Dr. Warner recalled that one night, a group of a dozen or more physical, occupational and licensed massage therapists showed up from the local hospital to give the firefighters massages. "Despite a somewhat indifferent attitude toward us, they could plainly see the other DC and I working next to them at a rate of up to 50 personnel (compared to their three) within five hours. The next night, one of the MTs came up to me and asked me about chiropractic as a career. She had a degree in PT and OT and said, 'It looks like you guys just have so much fun, and your patients really get well!'"

Dr. Warner recalled the day the fire "blew up" and rampaged through the forests. "It appeared as if a volcano had erupted. We had no control; just prayers. I asked one of the older firefighters how bad it was:

'After today's eruption, it should be out with the first good snowfall,' he said.

"As we realized how far away that was, we realized that he wasn't joking. We were very solemn that night."

The wildfires were ultimately contained, however.

Missionary Ridge

Thomas Garcia, DC, took part in the Missionary Ridge fire, beginning work at its command post June 10. Since graduating from Parker College of Chiropractic in 1992, he's often given care outside the confines of his office. "I've adjusted miners in Southern Arizona; mountain bikers in Utah and Colorado; and bikers at the Iron Horse Rally in Colorado," he explained, "though I have never worked in disaster conditions. Given my other experiences, I feel I was well-prepared to pack up my portable table and adjust people in an unconventional situation."

From the start, Dr. Garcia said he was determined to treat the firefighters: "I was turned away from the Incident Command Post in Durango, because the fire was a federal operation and chiropractors were not allowed into the main staging area where most of the firefighters were located. Eventually, I was issued a set of protective clothing, a hard hat and fire shelter, and I proceeded past roadblocked areas to adjust firefighters on the line nearest the fire, within approximately 200 yards. Because I was 'in uniform,' I was not stopped. So, wherever I saw a concentration of firefighters, I would break out my table and go to work."

A new command post was established at the local high school. "Every night, after office hours, I would go there," Dr. Garcia explained. "In a typical three-to-four-hour shift, I would adjust 50-70 firefighters. They would line up to be adjusted. And every one of them was very grateful, very appreciative."

Dr. Garcia had the support of his hometown, Bayfield, located south of the fire, even adjusting the local evacuees and Red Cross volunteers. He described some of his patients: "Many of these men and women needed full spine adjustments. There were assorted stiff necks, and shoulder and knee problems. One should bear in mind they worked long hours, and in very tough conditions!"

Drs. Garcia, Boyd and Warner all noted the surprise of the teams to find chiropractors at the sites; their gratitude for the services they provided; and that there was no shortage of professionals willing to donate their time to treat. Dr. Warner cited "30 or so doctors that deluged my office with offers to donate time and services. "He gave a special thanks to the efforts of DCs Mary Beth Guevarra; John Daugherty; Rick Reiss; Dick Ramos; and Jeff Henry.

The spirit of volunteerism appears alive and well in chiropractic.

Jim Harrison, associate editor

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