

## The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Chiropractor

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As I walked up the stairs to Old Doc's office, I thought the chances were good I might catch him between patients. He was almost retired now, and not nearly as busy as he was in his prime. Old Doc was a mentor to me when I was a chiropractic student, and I enjoyed visiting him and "picking his brain."

Doc no longer had a receptionist. His waiting room was empty as I entered; no surprise, considering his semi-retirement. Hearing no one, I wandered back to his treatment room. The door was ajar, so I peeked inside, and there was Old Doc, sitting on a stool at the head of an elderly gentleman, who was face-up on the adjusting table, looking quite relaxed. Doc was holding the rim of the patient's skull on his fingers, presumably reducing the tension on the fellow's neck. It took me a moment to realize both were asleep. I didn't have the heart to wake either, so I slowly backed away and tiptoed down the hall, out of the office. That was the last time I saw Doc.

Old Doc had a very busy practice when he was younger. He served the chiropractic profession in many capacities: organizer, lobbyist, educator, etc. He was a bit quirky, having some eccentric thoughts about chiropractic technique, as many DCs do. He was always going to write a book, *The Atlas and the Coccus*, which I know sounds like an English pub. In my mind, Doc was a composite of many old chiropractors I have known: individualistic, opinionated, compassionate, and in the habit of unwisely wearing plaid shirts with checkered pants.

But this story is not really about Old Doc at all. It is about going solo. Because for most of us, chiropractic practice is a solitary business. This article begs the question, "How can a DC spend the day surrounded by patients, and still feel alone?"

You see, Old Doc had lost his wife in his waning years, and he had two things left he cared about: The odd fellows at Rebekah Lodge on Wednesday nights; and his patients. But patients are not the same as colleagues. "It's a damn shame," he would say, "that chiropractors don't seem to get along well in the same office. It would be nice to have a DC buddy to talk to sometimes." Old Doc was lonely in the final days, but over his years in practice, no one ever fought the isolation of solo practice more than he did. No one ever had more lunches, phone conversations, meetings, or arguments with fellow doctors of chiropractic than he did.

He was right about solo practice. It seems to me that it all starts shortly after graduating chiropractic college. Leaving school with a modicum of practice experience, we often find ourselves subject to "on-the-job-training." We seldom find the residencies and institutional domestication that medical physicians experience. Few of us start out with an "Old Doc" to help guide our way and give us sage advice, such as, "Don't fool around with patients of the opposite sex."

What chiropractors need, in my humble opinion, is a clubhouse. MDs have clubhouses, such as hospitals, surgical centers, and group practice clinics. They can schmooze, ask each other clinical questions, share their fears, study together, and somehow, know they are all in this thing together.

But we DCs mostly live in our adjusting rooms, trying to figure it out by ourselves. It's easy to get lonely.

A chiropractor I know, in practice about 30 years, has had about 20 associates, mostly young docs just getting started. He keeps bringing them in, and they keep leaving ... suing him, swiping his patient database, running off with his office manager, or stealing his Activator adjusting instrument. "I try to help these kids succeed," he growls, "and they just keep stabbing me in the back." But that's not the real reason he keeps bringing in associates. He's lonely. He needs an audience, a conversation about what only chiropractors can talk about, an animal of his own breed, even if that animal turns out to be rabid.

A DC friend and I have been faxing each other most every Friday for several years. We do this to keep from going stir-crazy. We look for odd pictures of people in advertisements from newspapers or magazines, and paste the head or face of the other doc on a body of a person in the advertisement. (We have pictures of each other to access such heads and faces.) This keeps us amused, but mostly it lets the other doc know we are both still alive and kicking, even in our solo practice confines. Sometimes, we even discuss a patient's case, like real doctors.

All is not well in the world of medical physicians, I am sure. We all share the challenge of suffering humanity. But early years in training and requisite institutional servitude give them a common experience. If they get lonely, they can gather at the clubhouse.

Getting MDs to agree on anything is like herding cats. But getting chiropractors together is more like herding wet cats. Perhaps we DCs are better off faxing each other, or entering a chiropractic "chat room" on the Internet, in order to fight off isolation. After all, it has been said that if you get three chiropractors together, they will have four different opinions.

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