

## Chiropractic on Television: Help or Hindrance?

How many times has a patient come into your office and said with a smile, "Hey Doc, I was watching the tube last night and you'll never guess what they said about you guys." At this point, the conversation is probably going one of two ways: The patient will say that chiropractors were portrayed either as quacks or as modern miracle workers. Certainly we've lived through some trying "investigative reports," and as a profession, it seems we have responded appropriately. However, there are other portrayals of chiropractic that don't necessarily receive the same attention, but are important nonetheless.

So, the question becomes, just who has been talking about chiropractic on television? The answer is ... a lot of people, actually. A number of the top sitcoms from the past 15 years, such as "Friends," "Seinfeld," "That '70s Show," and "Two and a Half Men" all have included chiropractic in their story lines. In addition, characters on dramas like "ER," "The West Wing," "Judging Amy," "Nip/Tuck," "Law & Order: Criminal Intent," and "Queer as Folk" have had dialogue on chiropractic. Even animated shows such as "SpongeBob Squarepants" and "The Simpsons" have included chiropractic pieces.

Many of these episodes had only a fleeting remark or casual reference to the profession. For the most part, these quips seemed to be made for a quick reaction and did not advance the plot of the story. For instance, on "ER" when a patient told Dr. Carter he had a chiropractor diagnose him with mild scoliosis, Carter replied, "Everybody has mild scoliosis ... that's just something chiropractors say." While watching television over his breakfast cereal, SpongeBob sees his heroes Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy flexing their muscles, until a crack is heard and they are frozen in place. Mermaid Man quickly announces, "To the chiropractor! Away!" and they wobble off the screen to get help. "Judging Amy" and "The West Wing" took jabs at the quality of chiropractic education, while on one episode of "The Simpsons," a DC's recommendation was a punch line. In this case, Homer was looking for a new drinking establishment when he lumbered into a cartoon version of the sitcom "Cheers." He observed an inebriated Norm request another beer, to which the barkeep Woody replied, "I think you've had enough, Mr. Peterson. My chiropractor says I can't carry you home anymore."

Some television series have made interactions with chiropractors a subplot for the entire episode or even the whole series. In these kinds of situations, there almost always is a champion for the field who faces derision from the naysayers. On "Seinfeld," Jerry proclaimed his chiropractor was the best, while George was so skeptical he did not want to pay for services rendered. On "Friends," Rachel sang the praises of her chiropractor, in opposition to her father as well as sometimes-boyfriend Ross, who scoffed at her need for treatment. On "That '70s Show," the DC was intelligent while somewhat esoteric when seen hosting a public information session, but was construed as being sleazy as he talked about working on the gluteal region. When one of the central characters, Eric, expressed interest in pursuing a DC degree, his father Red was acerbic and unsupportive (as usual).

On "Queer as Folk," humor was found when the chiropractor was sympathetic and reassuring to the patient's need to remain prone after feeling aroused following treatment. This urban chiropractor was portrayed as very successful. He lived in a chic abode and drove a Jaguar. In

"Two and a Half Men" (one of the top-rated comedies currently in production), one of the main characters, Alan, is a chiropractor! How is Alan portrayed? Is he a hippy who comes across to millions of weekly viewers as some sort of New Age shaman? Quite the opposite; he is portrayed as a detail-oriented nerd who is straight-laced, clean-cut and proper. If "Two and a Half Men" is a modern take on "The Odd Couple," then Alan is Felix Unger. This is not to say chiropractors should admire being labeled nerds, but it is a much better stereotype than many of the alternatives, especially when it comes to the chiropractic healing art.

Who are the champions for chiropractic? Dr. Hibbard on "The Simpsons" sees Homer for his low back pain. Homer requests "some drugs and surgery," to which Dr. Hibbard responds, "Modern medicine has a lousy record of treating the back, we spend more time on the front." Homer agrees that there's some neat stuff on the front and listens when the MD endorses his chiropractor with, "Between you, me and my golf clubs, they're miracle workers." Dr. Troy on "Nip/Tuck" refers his fellow MD with neck pain, saying, "Hey, if drug abuse isn't your thing why don't you try a chiropractor?" Following the cervical adjustment Dr. McNamera receives, he tests his improved range of motion and proclaims, "Amazing!" to which the chiropractor replies, "Yeah we're not all quacks, no matter what the AMA says."

The concern that some chiropractors have expressed about the unflattering segments is that people place a value on the opinions of television characters (at least subliminally) and that this may influence the public's views and actions. An important question arises however: What are the character traits of those who are bad-mouthing chiropractic on these episodes? When the prickly remarks are coming from the likes of the continually neurotic George Costanza ("Seinfeld"), the supercilious and pathologically insecure Ross Gellar ("Friends"), and the close-minded Red Foreman ("That '70s Show"), it would seem the profession has little to be concerned about.

In a similar vein, the majority of quips made on dramatic series appear to be negative. But what aspects of chiropractic are being depicted and is there a basis in reality for these comments? Derogatory remarks in these instances often come as a result of the character's ignorance. In fact, it could be said that police officers, medical doctors, and lawyers are the individuals who should be writing letters of complaint to the television producers for inaccurate or unfair representations. When "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" showed a detective implying chiropractors were not real doctors and thus could violate doctor/patient confidentiality, it made detectives appear insensitive and ignorant of the law. When Dr. Carter on "ER" dismissed a spinal curvature by saying that everybody has mild scoliosis, his comment could be construed as medical flippancy. On "Judging Amy" and "The West Wing," when it was implied that chiropractic education was second rate or for those who cannot get into other professions, it highlighted the fact that many have little understanding of the chiropractic curriculum.

The primary point to remember is that television writers are trying to create stimulating dialogue, and there is little desire to create polite and accurate professional representations. They are not educated as chiropractors, nor are they lawyers, doctors or judges; and they do not have a full appreciation of these professions. These characterizations, while creative and entertaining, clearly do not reflect reality. It should also be remembered that all professions are subject to similar public interest and disabuse, and it would serve us well not to overreact. For example, if lawyers wrote a letter for every slanderous remark made on TV, they would never have time to practice. The best and worst features of the legal profession have been featured in "Boston Legal," "LA Law," "Law & Order," "The Practice," "Judging Amy," "Night Court," and many other series. For medicine, look at "Scrubs," "ER," "Chicago Hope," "House MD," and "Grey's Anatomy," to name a few. On these shows, the practitioners are not always portrayed as heroes and are not always portrayed as competent.

As doctors of chiropractic, we are well-educated and help people lead more active, healthy, pain-free lives. We should be confident enough to rise above the barbs of the entertainment industry. At the same time, we should understand that if popular culture were to ignore chiropractic, it would suggest the impact made by the field is negligible and not worthy of mention. Above all, regardless of what people are saying, the important thing is that they are talking. This means millions of viewers are passively being made more aware of chiropractic. With each passing reference, people are constantly being reminded that there is someone outside the allopathic world who is available to address their health care needs. The best we can do in our professional lives is become good role models so that when a television show takes a shot at chiropractic, we can sit back and smile, while the rest of the viewing audience responds with, "My chiropractor's not like that."

### *Resources*

1. Aronsohn, L. (writer), Roberts, M. (writer), Berlinger, R. (director). (2003). "Alan Harper, Frontier Chiropractor" [television series episode]. In: C. Lorre, L. Aronsohn (co-creators), "Two and a Half Men." Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Television Production Inc.
2. Caldwell, R. (writer), Keene, E. (director). (2002). "Cause for Alarm" [television series episode]. In: J. Tinker, B. D'Elia, A. Brenneman, C. Tavel (co-creators), "Judging Amy." Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Television.
3. Chang, Y. (writer), Orman, J. (writer), Haid, C. (director). (2002). "Insurrection" [television series episode]. In: M. Crichton (creator), "E.R." Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Studios.
4. Cowan, R. (writer), Lipman, D. (writer), Mulcahy, R. (director). (2001). "Episode 105" [television series episode]. In: R. Cowan, D. Lipman (North American developers), "Queer as Folk." Toronto: Showcase Television.
5. David, L. (writer), Cheronos, T. (director). (1991). "The Pen" [television series episode]. In: L. David, J. Seinfeld (co-creators), "Seinfeld." Los Angeles: NBC Studios.
6. David, L. (writer), Seinfeld, J. (writer), Cheronos, T. (director). (1991). "The Ex-Girlfriend" [television series episode]. In: L. David, J. Seinfeld (co-creators), "Seinfeld." Los Angeles: NBC Studios.
7. Falchuk, B. (writer), Brazil, S. (director). (2003). "Cliff Mantegna" [television series episode]. In: R. Murphy (creator), "Nip/Tuck." Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Studios.
8. Kavet, G. (writer), Robin, A. (writer), Ackerman, A. (director). (1997). "The Nap" [television series episode]. In: L. David, J. Seinfeld (co-creators), "Seinfeld." Los Angeles: NBC Studios.
9. Klein, C. (writer), Lender, J. (writer), Lawrence, M. (writer), Klein, C. (storyboard director), Yasumi, T. (animation director). (2000). "Hooky/Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy II" [television series episode]. In: S. Hillenburg (creator), "SpongeBob Squarepants." Los Angeles: Nickelodeon Studios.
10. Kurland, S. (writer), Mancuso, G. (director). (1996). "The One With the Racecar Bed" [television series episode]. In: M. Kauffman, D. Crane (co-creators), "Friends." Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Studios.
11. Lorre, C. (writer), Aronsohn, L. (writer), Fryman, P. (director). (2005). "Woo-Hoo, A Hernia Exam" [television series episode]. In: C. Lorre, L. Aronsohn (co-creators), "Two and a Half Men." Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Television Production Inc.
12. Martin, T. (writer), Anderson, B. (director). (2001). "Pokey Mom" [television series episode]. In: M. Groening (creator), "The Simpsons." Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox.
13. Moore, B. (writer), Peterson, C. (writer), Trainer, D. (director). (2005). "Gimme Shelter" [television series episode]. In: M. Brazil, B. Turner, T. Turner (co-creators), "That '70s Show." Los Angeles: Fox Broadcasting Company.
14. Sacks, D. (writer), Kirkland, M. (director). (1994). "Fear of Flying" [television series episode]. In: M. Groening (creator), "The Simpsons." Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox.
15. Sengupta, S. (writer), Zakrewski, A. (director). (2005). "Unchained" [television series episode]. In: D. Wolf (Creator), "Law & Order: Criminal Intent." Los Angeles: Universal Studios.

16. Wells, J. (writer), Graves, A. (director). (2004). "The Birnam Wood" [television series episode]. In: A. Sorkin (creator), "The West Wing." Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Television.

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