



CHIROPRACTIC

## Opening Doors for Chiropractic

*DAVID ELTON, DC, IS HELPING CHANGE THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY - AND HEALTH CARE - FROM THE INSIDE OUT.*

Editorial Staff

Dr. David Elton is no stranger to the insurance industry, with more than a quarter century performing clinical, credentialing, network designation, professional / government relations functions, and more for OptumHealth, a subsidiary of UnitedHealth Group.

In his current role as vice president of musculoskeletal R&D for OptumLabs, Dr. Elton, a graduate of Northwestern Health Sciences University, is helping demonstrate chiropractic's value within health care and (hopefully) spur changes in insurance coverage and reimbursement - significant for DCs, patients and the U.S. health care system.

This year alone, Dr. Elton and colleagues authored studies suggesting that for both back and neck pain, chiropractic has the lowest per-cost visit of any health care provider and is the most common "first line" service provided by non-prescribing providers.<sup>1-2</sup> (First-line services are the most "guideline concordant," per American College of Physicians [ACP] guidelines. Second-line services include radiographs and NSAID prescriptions; third-line services include opioids, injections and surgery.)



A third 2022 Elton, et al., study also found that spinal patients in certain "disadvantaged" (lower-income) zip codes are more likely to initially contact an emergency-medicine physician or primary care provider, and less likely to contact a DC. The result: greater use of medication, rather than guideline-concordant conservative care such as chiropractic.<sup>3</sup>

Collectively, these study findings reinforce that chiropractic is an effective, low-cost, guideline-supported first option for spinal care; but that more patients need access to it, regardless of economic status - in line with UnitedHealth Group's mission to improve health care. In Dr. Elton's own words:



"2022 was a year where the pursuit of the UHG mission of making the healthcare system work better for everyone resulted in my being able to publish data on spinal disorders - a common, costly condition that is the leading contributor to global years lived with disability. Individuals more deserving of this recognition than me are those that translate studies from me and others into systemic changes in local healthcare delivery systems."

What types of changes? Dr. Elton references a 2019 low back pain study<sup>5</sup> he co-authored: "As an example of how this research is being translated to help make the health care system work better for individuals with LBP, UHC has developed benefit plan designs and provided consumer decision-support information that, when appropriate and consistent with high-quality clinical practice guidelines, encourage individuals to pursue non-pharmacological and non-interventional approaches such as spinal manipulation and active care."

UnitedHealth Group is the largest insurer in the U.S. by revenue, and subsidiary OptumHealth serves more than 125 million individual consumers, 80 percent of health plans and 90 percent of U.S. hospitals.<sup>4</sup> In other words, if UHG / Optum believes in chiropractic, the chiropractic

profession, patients and health care are sure to benefit immensely.

Dr. David Elton is helping cultivate that belief, which is why we are proud to recognize him as *Dynamic Chiropractic's* 2022 Person of the Year.

### *References*

1. "Insurers Are Finally Figuring It Out." *Dynamic Chiropractic*, September 2022. [Read Here](#)
2. "Chiropractic: Best for Neck Pain: New Neck Pain Study Follows LBP Study That Yielded Similar Conclusions." *Dynamic Chiropractic*, October 2022. [Read Here](#)
3. Elton D, Zhang M, Okaya A. Geographic variation in the treatment of spinal disorders: association with health care professional availability, and population socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. A retrospective cohort study. [Read Here](#)
4. Kazis LE, Ameli O, Rothendler J, et al. Observational retrospective study of the association of initial healthcare provider for new-onset low back pain with early and long-term opioid use. *BMJ Open*, 2019 Sep 20;9(9):e028633. [Read Here](#)
5. Adams K. "11 Numbers That Show How Big Optum's Role in Healthcare Is." *Becker's Hospital Review*, Feb. 9, 2021.

DECEMBER 2022