

Surviving Dystonia: A Chiropractic Success Story

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There are few treatments that are successful for the [rapidly progressive disorder of dystonia](#). I am blessed to have found one in the applications of chiropractic utilizing a functional neurological approach. Dystonia is a disease caused by a problem in the basal ganglia of my brain that results in a painful distortion of the muscles of my body. There are various severity levels of dystonia; unfortunately, I had one of the most debilitating types, a hemidystonia that involved the entire right side of my face and body.

Let's start with a little background: I am a 2007 graduate of Palmer College of Chiropractic. I was born and raised in Marquette, Mich. At age 15, I moved away from home after receiving an alpine skiing scholarship from Gould Academy in Bethel, Maine, and completed high school while competing both nationally and internationally. I went on to college at the University of Vermont, where I competed as a NCAA Division I college skier on an engineering scholarship. I graduated with a mechanical engineering degree. While at college, I got assistance from a chiropractor and decided to pursue education at Palmer.

Spiraling Out of Control

I was in a severe car accident in 2005 while at chiropractic school. Not long after the accident, my dystonic symptoms began as a localized tightness and pulling sensation on the right side of my neck that gradually spread over a few months to my right face and right pectoral regions. The muscle in the front of my neck on the right, the SCM, became visually larger and created a miserable tugging sensation on my head toward the ground.

It became increasingly more difficult to hold my head up. My upright stance started to erode continuously and unrelentingly; it was like an evil entity had set vises in all my muscles on my right side and increased the tension by the day. Upon moving my right arm, I could feel my right leg muscles contract. My motor commands were completely aberrant.

By 2009, I was on the fast track to becoming unable to stand on my own two feet as a consequence of a life sentenced to dystonia. I desperately sought help from a myriad of health care providers of every discipline across the country and underwent a multitude of treatments, yet my dystonia continued to worsen. There was no relief and no hope in sight. As my dystonia spread through several muscle groups, the crippling effects of my torsional, constant and inappropriate muscle action were causing my body to be contorted in an unrelenting state of contraction throughout my right side, from my face to the bottom of my foot.

The pain was excruciating. Envision holding a right-legged squat position while at the same time holding a bowling ball with your right arm all day long. The muscle fatigue, tightness, pulling and pain were unbearable. My once-athletic frame and self-image became unrecognizable. I was grief-stricken and terrified; not only for myself, but that my 5-month-old daughter would have a disabled mother in a

wheelchair and my husband would have to bear the burden of caring for me. My cognitive ability, communicative ability, and social skills declined in direct proportion to my deregulated motor control. The progression led to twitches in my right face and right eyelid. I lost my ability to hold my daughter while standing.

A Glimmer of Hope

I had been on [Prof. Frederick Carrick's](#) patient waiting list for three years when, in August 2009, I received word that he would accept me as a patient at Grand Rounds in Amsterdam. A small bit of hope arose within me and I did not sleep for a week prior to my trip from North Dakota to Amsterdam. On Sept. 18, 2009, I shuddered with anticipation as I got called to the front of an auditorium full of doctors to be examined by Dr. Carrick. My stomach was in knots. My life lay in his hands.

My hope was strengthened and reinforced by his clinical examination. It was like having someone clearly and accurately uncover all aspects of my dysfunction for the first time. His examination revealed that my cortical representations were aberrant and that I needed to establish plasticity in both the environmental and somesthetic representations of my brain. My ability to move my eyes quickly to any target were severely impaired; thus, what I perceived to be my environmental reality was not real. For example, when I moved my right arm, my right leg also moved. And when he tapped my right biceps with a reflex hammer, my entire right arm moved!

Prof. Carrick prescribed a treatment plan specifically for me to change the integration of my brain and to decrease my dystonic posturing. He performed very unique and dynamic osseous adjustments to my spine and extremities, and then empowered me to do prescribed eye movement exercises and coordinated right arm and leg activities at home. I have not had a chiropractic adjustment of any sort since that day, but I do continue the same structured program of eye and body movements each day. As a practicing chiropractor, I find it incredible that I needed to be adjusted only one time. I was trained to administer a series of adjustments to patients. Certainly, I had countless numbers of adjustments in my quest for a cure.

The exercises I perform are based on the plasticity of my brain and the need to establish a new and more accurate cortical map of my own body and of the environment that surrounds me. The eye movements and coordinated activities that I do are very specific to my needs and therefore differ from procedures that might be used in the treatment of other dystonic patients. These rehabilitation exercises take me roughly five minutes per session and I complete them one time per hour.

My eye movement exercises involve quick movements to targets at graduated distances in a plane moving up and to my right with my head in a neutral position. I then engage slow movement of my eyes down and to the left, pursuing a target. I repeat these targeted and paced eye exercises 10 times every hour to re-establish my cortical map. The performance of this therapy is simple, yet the design is complex and involves integration and activation of areas of my brain that promote plastic, long-term changes. Specific understanding of what is happening in the superior collicular area of my midbrain and globus pallidus of my telencephalon are central to the uniqueness of my therapies.

I also perform right cerebellar-stimulating exercises that consist of complex coordinated movements of my right limbs without resistance. These activities take me a couple of minutes and I also perform them each hour.

Reversing Dystonia With Chiropractic Functional Neurology

Remarkably, these brain-based therapies are reversing my dystonia. In only 11 months, I am no longer "caged" in a rigid, contorted body, and the vise-like tension on my muscles is markedly decreasing. I am getting my life back and happily can report that I am an enthusiastic 30-year-old who tenaciously lifts my 30-pound daughter with just my right arm. I am doing magnificently and have experienced a miraculous transformation that supersedes my wildest dreams. My right leg no longer has symptoms and I am able to sit up with ease. I am comfortable and my dystonic symptoms recede daily. My body is "untwisting" and my motor commands are becoming increasingly more appropriate. I walk for a sustained 40 minutes at a time for exercise. I am even rollerblading and water skiing!

My personal triumphs are bittersweet, however, as my heart aches for my afflicted dystonic comrades who do not have access to qualified physicians. Others are sadly losing their independence and vibrancy. During Grand Rounds in Amsterdam one month following my first visit with Prof. Carrick, he attended to other afflicted individuals.

A woman in a wheelchair presented with severely advanced generalized dystonia that affected her entire body. Her legs, arms, neck and face were contorted and angulated in fixed and rigid postures. She had lost her ability to articulate words and her chin was held rigidly to her chest while her right ear was fixed to her right shoulder. Her mom had stopped working to take care of her. Her soul was trapped in a failed body. She was the same age as me. Her dystonic symptoms began four years prior to mine; that easily could have been me.

It is as a dedication to her and to the others who are suffering that I am sharing my story. We need other physicians to embrace the applications and developments within chiropractic and functional neurology.

The Palmers were absolutely correct that a chiropractic adjustment is a powerful stimulus to the nervous system. The science of today validates the understanding that our adjustments have both segmental and supra-segmental effects to the nervous system and are brain based. This is why an adjustment at one level can have a variety of consequences, depending on the individual. Joint angulations and fixed postures that chiropractors see daily: toe in, toe out, shoulder impingement syndromes, hyper lordosis lower back, shin splints and tight psoas muscles are all a consequence of how our brains are setting muscle tone and controlling posture.

A subluxation complex represents a change in joint position and muscle recruitment around a segment as a consequence of brain firing. In order to stabilize body function and to enhance aspects of human performance, functional neurology examinations and applications are imperative. Supra-segmental brain therapies have the potential to be the big thing, not only for dystonic patients but also for other muscle-tone and movement-related disorders that chiropractors routinely see.

My life has been saved by appropriate treatment unique to chiropractic functional neurology. Drugs and surgery are not beneficial to the treatment of my disease. Since September 2009, I have witnessed the successful treatment of many other movement disorders. Each patient has at-home rehabilitation scenarios that are uniquely different from mine.

The spectrum of movement dysfunction that chiropractors and other physicians care for must be treated utilizing accurate parameters consistent with a foundation rooted in exact understanding of the nervous system. I am proud to be a chiropractor and to have the health and freedom from a disease process that allows me to serve humankind again. I am blessed to have experienced the caring of my family, friends and colleagues during the terrible times during which dystonia almost claimed

my life.

I would love nothing more than for our profession to advance our interpretation of what it means to be a chiropractor; a doctor of the nervous system. I am steadfastly dedicated to the study and clinical learning that will allow me to serve at a higher level each day. You are welcome to contact me directly for further information. I sincerely look forward to hearing from you.

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