

Enlisting Chiropractic to Serve America's Military

While many military health care facilities still lack chiropractic care, there might never have been a first DC in the military if not for the heroic efforts of [Logan College of Chiropractic](#) graduate Dr. Jon Buriak. In this story, reprinted with permission from the Logan Tower, read how Dr. Buriak led the battle to integrate chiropractic care into the military health care system – and won.

In the mud-packed trenches of World War I, the U.S. infantry defended freedom with weaponry arsenal many Americans today would consider primitive. While the Great War relied on handheld bayonets and fiery grenades, 76 years later the U.S. would unleash stealth bombers, cruise missiles and satellites to win the first Gulf War. This technological transformation proved that America – led by its Congress and supported by its taxpayers – could provide our soldiers with the most sophisticated arsenal on the battlefield.

During this nearly 80-year span, another fight quietly ensued. In a conflict that bears no memorable name, men and women from the chiropractic field challenged the military health care system. The battle lines were drawn over care for the American soldier. Chiropractors were bravely fighting to change Congress' antiquated health care perspectives, integrating chiropractic care to sustain military personnel on and off the battlefield. Their efforts were led by a few good men (and women), including April 1985 Logan College of Chiropractic graduate [Dr. Jon Buriak](#).

A Chiropractor and a Patriot



Dr. Buriak brainstorms with colleagues before meeting with the U.S. Navy rear admiral. Seated on left-front is Dr.

Barry McAlpine, decorated Vietnam Army personnel; behind him is Dr. Shelby Elliott, Texas College of Chiropractic then-president. Seated on right-front is Dr. Louis Sportelli, then chairman of the ACA; behind him is Dr. Buriak.

Far removed from the country's political and military epicenter in Washington, D.C., chiropractic student Jon Buriak pursued his studies on the serene Logan campus. Despite the geographic distance now separating Buriak from our nation's policymakers, the Virginia native respected the arsenal required to go to battle for a cause.

After working at the local shipyard until age 20, Buriak decided to abandon his laborious career path and venture into computing technology. Pairing his shipyard experience with computer training, Buriak's new line of work supported the designs of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and oil tankers.

Still, Buriak said chiropractic was "always something I wanted to do." Unable to dismiss his chiropractic calling, he moved to St. Louis to earn his doctor of chiropractic degree. While a student at Logan College, Buriak uncovered another passion he couldn't shelve. "I wanted chiropractic to be everywhere it wasn't and, at that time, my focus was the military and hospital health care systems," he said.

His first step toward placing chiropractic in the military health care system began as a student in the 1980s. He established the [Veterans' Affairs](#) Committee at Logan, a grassroots effort that educated local veterans' groups about chiropractic.

During this time, Buriak said, the chiropractic profession was convinced the U.S. Armed Forces made their health care decisions based on budget criteria. He soon learned that if he ever wanted to practice chiropractic on a military base or hospital, he and his colleagues would have to work through Congress.

The American Chiropractic Association (ACA) served as Dr. Buriak's strategic ally for the legislative offensive. "We knew that, regardless of merit, chiropractic couldn't be included in the military health system without Congressional approval," he said. "I was asked to serve on the ACA's military subcommittee in the mid-1990s and proceeded to write the necessary language for Congressional review, including our scope of practice and detailing the equipment we would need."



President Bill Clinton visits sick and injured at Walter Reed. Here, Clinton is pictured with several distinguished members of the Army medical center's team.

A Key Victory

Dr. Buriak and the ACA earned Congressional approval in 1995 to include chiropractic care for the Navy, Air Force and Army ... as a demonstration program. Formally called the Chiropractic Health Care Demonstration Program (CHCDP), chiropractors could now participate in this trial session, which would test the feasibility of integrating chiropractic care into the military health care system based on patient progress.

To lead the charge, Dr. Buriak accepted the pioneering post as chiropractic physician at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The military also hired him, through Aliron International, Inc., to recruit doctors of chiropractic (DCs) for the CHCDP sites.

Despite the profession's fervor for the Congress-backed program, asking DCs to leave their practices, homes and, essentially, their entire lives to report for duty at a CHCDP treatment site presented Dr. Buriak with a difficult mission. Not to mention, the [Department of Defense](#) (DoD) would only secure employment for these selected DCs for one year, assuming they could assimilate into the sites' 200-year-old medical model.

According to one of the CHCDP chiropractic physicians, quoted in a 2001 Journal of the American Chiropractic Association article, the general lack of chiropractic knowledge and inconsistencies with medical and chiropractic terminologies and recordkeeping created some of the most frequent practice challenges. For example, on-site neurosurgeons were familiar with the "subluxation," only they associated a different meaning with the term than the chiropractic definition.

Dr. Buriak credited his background in computers with helping to accelerate chiropractic's integration. "The military is so advanced in its technology and use of computers that my computer knowledge was

more than a supplement to my duties; it became key for survival."

Still, the obstacles that faced CHCDP chiropractic physicians, hired and managed by Dr. Buriak, were consistently conquered by a shared commitment to serve America's military personnel. Dr. Buriak and his team of chiropractic physicians were also keenly aware that the success of this program would not only demonstrate chiropractic's results to the DoD and Congress but could, finally, position chiropractic into its rightful place in the military health care system.

Five years after earning Congressional approval for the CHCDP program, Dr. Buriak received a letter from the ACA's then-president [Dr. James Mertz](#). Excerpts from the correspondence read:

As you now know, the Department of Defense (DoD) released its final report on chiropractic care to Congress in March 2000. The DoD report clearly demonstrated:

- *Higher levels of patient satisfaction with chiropractic care vs. traditional medical care*
- *Superior outcomes for patients receiving chiropractic care vs. traditional medical care*
- *Chiropractic care results in fewer hospital stays*
- *There are significant improvements in military "readiness" due to a large reduction in lost duty time for personnel receiving chiropractic care vs. traditional medical care*

Because of your excellent work treating military personnel in the demonstration program and the significant support on Capitol Hill, Congress included a provision in the FY 2001 Defense Authorization bill (H.R. 4205) that will, for the first time, guarantee access to chiropractic care for all active-duty personnel.

President Bill Clinton signed this [important legislation](#) into law on October 30, 2000. Needless to say, this was an historic move forward for the chiropractic profession. Further, a report completed by the chiropractic members of the CHCDP Oversight Advisory Committee determined the DoD could save approximately \$28 million annually by recovering some 199,000 work days lost because of back pain and other neuromusculoskeletal ailments among military personnel. Logan President Dr. George A. Goodman represented one of the five U.S. chiropractic physicians to serve on the Oversight Advisory Committee.

"Dr. Buriak has demonstrated great determination in his pursuit of improved access to chiropractic care for the U.S. military," said Dr. Goodman. "We applaud his and all the CHCDP Oversight Advisory Committee members' successful efforts in this campaign."

A 2009 study found "disease of the musculoskeletal system and connective system, such as back pain, is the number one ailment of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans accessing Department of Veterans' Affairs treatment."

Chiropractic and Logan Take Flight

After five years at Walter Reed, Dr. Buriak joined the 375th Medical Group as chiropractic physician at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois. "The response to chiropractic care at these military treatment sites became so great that the military personnel were clamoring for it," said Dr. Buriak.

It didn't take long for his medical colleagues to take notice.

"I remember one of the emergency room doctors from Scott Air Force Base coming to see me," he

said. "He had never been a chiropractic patient before, but his low-back pain had become so intense that he could no longer perform his duties. I treated him one time and he was back to work, and then went on to become a medical doctor for the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds."

With all that Dr. Buriak accomplished for chiropractic and the care of our U.S. military, he says chiropractic students will, ultimately, determine the profession's role in the military and broader integrated health care system. "I feel like I've done my part and now it's time for the future of chiropractic to step in," he said. "I'm very proud of what has transpired with our role in the military health care system, but there is a lot of work that still needs to be done at the hands of chiropractic's next generation."

In June 2008, Dr. Buriak retired.

Our Future Mission

Since the demonstration project Dr. Buriak helped shape and lead, chiropractic care has expanded among the military branches of the Air Force, Army and Navy. In the past two years alone, the DoD has added chiropractic care to nine bases. Chiropractic and Logan maintain a strong presence at Scott Air Force Base (AFB) under the leadership of Dr. Charles Portwood, a December 1991 Logan graduate. Today, Dr. Portwood oversees Logan students and the care they provide at the base through a Training Affiliation Agreement between Scott AFB and Logan College. As part of the agreement, Logan worked with other chiropractors and the military to help design chiropractic's integration into the military setting. According to Dr. Portwood, Logan students at Scott AFB are exposed to direct patient care and advanced imaging, including magnetic resonance imaging, computed tomography, diagnostic ultrasound and digital radiography.

"Since Dr. Buriak first introduced doctors of chiropractic to the military health care system, we have evolved this relationship to now incorporate chiropractic students into the offering," he said. "Our Logan students involved in the program at Scott Air Force Base have become an integral part of the complex diagnostic and clinical decision-making process. They have an unprecedented opportunity to match their educational experiences with diagnostic and treatment protocols to care for patients from the Air Force, Army and Marines."

Dr. Portwood says Logan's continued involvement and contributions at military sites, such as Scott AFB, help ensure the continuation of chiropractic in the military health care system. And, these efforts have not gone unnoticed, either by Scott Air Force Base, whose leadership has recognized Logan's commitment to excellence in patient care, or by Dr. Buriak.

"I hold Dr. Portwood and the Logan team in the highest regards for the job they've done, providing chiropractic care to the military and providing Logan students with a wealth of information and knowledge they couldn't get anywhere else," said Dr. Buriak.

As for Logan's future role, Dr. Portwood confirmed, "The military chiropractic movement, which began with Dr. Buriak and is carried on by our students, remains the cornerstone of our commitment to clinical excellence and the Logan student."

To reach Dr. Buriak today, please e-mail him at dr.jon.j.buriak@gmail.com.

