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## DOCTORS OF CHIROPRACTIC: ADDRESSING THE LOOMING PROVIDER SHORTAGE

**Introduction:** As America's health care system stretches to accommodate the demands of an aging population, chiropractic's efficacy, affordability and emphasis on disease prevention will likely find favor among those charged with resolving the situation. That our current medical delivery system is overtaxed and costly is no exaggeration. According to an Institutes of Medicine (IOM) 2008 report, *Retooling for an Aging America: Building the Health Care Workforce*, the number of adults aged 65 and older will nearly double from 37 million to over 70 million between 2005 and 2030 - an increase from 12 percent of the United States' population to almost 20 percent. Though the surge in population was predicted decades prior, little was done to prepare the health care workforce for its arrival. Nor could anyone have foreseen, years past, how recent passage of H.R. 3590's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act would add an additional 32 million previously uninsured Americans along with their burdensome health care demands as they gained insurance coverage.

In response to the system's current challenges, IOM urges that immediate steps be taken to increase health care workforce numbers and to enhance workers' efficiency. Prudent, given IOM's counsel, would be the identification of licensed health care providers whose education, training and skills enable them to provide primary care services to patients. More than 65,000 doctors of chiropractic practice currently delivering portal of entry care throughout the nation are well suited to significantly fill a health care workforce gap that is about to reach gaping proportions upon the imminent entry of the newly insured.

### **Chiropractic Preparedness**

Standards governing the academic preparation of chiropractors are rigorously enforced by the Council on Chiropractic Education, the profession's accrediting body under the auspices of the United States Department of Education. Trained to diagnose and, where appropriate to refer to other professional providers, doctors of chiropractic assist patients who suffer from a wide array of health issues with care that is safe, effective and affordable. As the shortage of primary care providers becomes increasingly acute, chiropractic's collaborative approach to treatment ensures that patients will be seen by professionals' best suited to relieve their particular ailment. Also, chiropractic's emphasis on wellness and disease prevention helps patients fend off chronic disorders, enhance their quality of life, and reduce expenses attributable to health care.

## What Chiropractic Is

Chiropractic is a conservative approach that includes the full range of standard case-management protocols including the application of broad diagnostic responsibilities and skills. Doctors of chiropractic are well versed in the biomechanical sciences, neuromusculoskeletal conditions, and in the art of manual manipulative procedures known as “chiropractic adjustments”. Doctors of chiropractic also recommend therapeutic and rehabilitative exercise, provide nutritional advice, and offer lifestyle counseling. Patients benefit most when their providers willingly collaborate with professionals in other disciplines; consequently chiropractors favor an integrative health care approach. Chiropractic physicians also provide essential services including diagnostic studies, prevention and wellness screenings and laboratory testing. As with other primary care providers, doctors of chiropractic, provide a range of services designed to meet the direct-access needs of patients of all ages.

## Efficacy

Chiropractic care has long enjoyed satisfaction among its growing patient base as revealed in a 1995 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* where patients rated satisfaction with their chiropractor higher than with their medical doctor or orthopedic surgeon.<sup>i</sup> A leading consumer publication recently reported that patients ranked chiropractic care higher for efficacy and satisfaction than that received from medical specialists, physical therapists and acupuncturists. Of 14,000 patients surveyed, 88 percent receiving chiropractic manipulation indicated it helped greatly and 59 percent were “completely” or “very” satisfied with their doctor of chiropractic – the highest among the survey professions represented. Consistently high marks for patient satisfaction are due largely to chiropractic’s favorable outcomes and excellent safety record.<sup>ii</sup> Over the past several decades chiropractic has become the health care pathway of choice for tens of millions of Americans.<sup>iii</sup>

Chiropractic physicians have demonstrated themselves valuable healthcare team members who readily work with allopathic providers in hospitals and clinics, and are therefore well prepared to participate in the establishment of medical homes. Employing doctors of chiropractic in portal-of-entry health care roles and medical home settings can help stem the ever-widening workforce gap immediately, effectively and affordably.

## Critical Facts to Consider:

- A 2007 study found that when doctors of chiropractic operated as PCPs using a nonsurgical/nonpharmaceutical approach, there were reductions in both clinical utilization and cost as compared with PCPs using conventional medicine alone.<sup>iv</sup>
- A 2008 study in the *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* found “many patients initially visit doctors of chiropractic for back pain or other neuromusculoskeletal complaints only to discover that chiropractic offers more than they had expected — a holistic philosophy of natural healing, based on principles asserting how structure and function are intimately related, that manual methods are a key means for achieving structural and functional integrity, that diet and exercise are crucial determinants of health, and that stopping illness before it starts (or in its early stages) is always better than intervening when illness or dysfunction has rooted deeply.”<sup>v</sup>
- The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) named doctors of chiropractic among potential members of community health teams to support the development of medical homes. Patient-centered medical homes are defined as “an approach to providing comprehensive primary care for children, youth and adults.”<sup>vi</sup>

- Doctors of chiropractic are uniquely trained to address neuromusculoskeletal ailments, and the number of patients presenting with these types of ailments are continually rising. A May 2009 article in the *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* indicated that lower back problems are considered the most prevalent pain complaint that affects the general population, with a reported lifetime prevalence of up to 75 percent. According to February 2010 data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, more veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have sought treatment for neuromusculoskeletal ailments than for any other physical malady.
- Not only are neuromusculoskeletal conditions widespread, they are also costly. A 2008 article from the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* reported the cost of treating spinal pain has become the sixth most expensive medical condition in America at \$86 billion in 2005--a 65 percent increase since 1997. Doctors of chiropractic provide unparalleled expertise in the neuromusculoskeletal system and can cost-effectively treat the conditions plaguing more and more Americans.

**Summary:** Throughout the United States there looms a serious shortfall in the number of available health care providers at a time when demands on the country's health care delivery system and associated costs are escalating. Over 65,000 licensed doctors of chiropractic are prepared, and well positioned, through education, training, experience, and geographic penetration, to relieve the increasing burdens shouldered by other health care providers. Doctors of chiropractic offer a clinically proven, cost-effective, natural approach to health and disease prevention. Their high-quality, easily accessible, and essential care to Americans suffering painful acute and chronic disorders enables patients to resume optimal function and to thereafter assume healthy lifestyles. Doctors of chiropractic, in supporting a practice model that emphasizes evidence-based wellness care and disease prevention, are uniquely qualified to play an integral role in a challenged, and rapidly evolving, American health delivery system.

The members of the Summit Government Relations committee and Working Group include Gary Cuneo, Dr Jerry DeGrado, John Falardeau, Dr Ronald Farabaugh, Dr Jason Goodman, Dr Jay Greenstein, Ronald M. Hendrickson, Dr William Meeker, Dr Michael McLean, Dr John Nab, David O'Bryon, Dr Keith Overland, Robert Pohtos, Dr Daniel Redwood, Dr Mario Spoto, Dr Coralee Van Egmond, Dr Gary Walsemann, and Dr Rodney Williams.

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<sup>i</sup> Carey TS, Garrett J, Jackman A, McLaughlin C, Fryer J, Smucker DR. "North Carolina Back Pain Project." *New England Journal of Medicine* 1995: 913-917.

<sup>ii</sup> Cooper RA, McKee HJ. "Chiropractic in the United States: Trends and Issues." *Milbank Q* 2003, 81:107-38.

<sup>iii</sup> Eisenberg, D.M., R.B. Davis, S.L. Ettner, et al. "Trends in alternative medicine use in the United States, 1990-1997: Results of a follow-up national survey." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 1998:1569-75.

<sup>iv</sup> Sarnat R, Winterstein J, Cambron J. "Clinical Utilization and Cost Outcomes from an Integrative Medicine Independent Physician Association: An Additional Three Year Update" *JMPT* 2007: 263-269.

<sup>v</sup> Redwood D, Globe G. Prevention and Health Promotion by Chiropractors. *Am J Lifestyle Med.* 2008;2:537-545

<sup>vi</sup> American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Physicians, and American Osteopathic Association. [Joint principles of the patient-centered medical home.](#) 2007 March.