A response to the letter “Backlash follows chiropractors’ attempts to suppress scientific debate”

The New Zealand Chiropractors’ Association (NZCA) would like to address a number of inaccuracies in the letter “Backlash follows chiropractors’ attempts to suppress scientific debate”.

The authors infer that the NZCA complaint made to the “Broadcasting Standards Association” about comments made on television regarding chiropractic by Shaun Holt was somehow an attempt to stifle academic free speech and suppress scientific debate. This is incorrect. The complaint was primarily directed at a number of statements Holt presented as facts, but which were inaccurate. The complaint focused on the following statements, with relevant extracts of the Broadcasting Standards Authority’s ruling provided:

Statement that chiropractic treatment “can cause stroke” and has resulted in “at least 700 cases” of severe injury

[52] In the Authority’s view, the information supplied to it by Dr Holt (see paragraphs [29] and [30]) does not provide sufficient basis for his statement that chiropractic treatment “can cause stroke”.

[56] ….It therefore finds that it was also inaccurate to state that there are over 700 cases of such injuries, and that viewers would have been misled by the statement.

At the time of broadcast the Bone and Joint Decade had already published the most comprehensive research into vertebrobasilar artery (VBA) stroke, looking at over 100 million person years worth of data. They uncovered only 818 cases of all aetiologies and “no evidence of excess risk of VBA stroke associated chiropractic care compared to primary care”. The incidence of VBA stroke was higher in both chiropractic and primary healthcare provider groups compared to age and sex matched controls, and this was considered likely due to patients with headache and neck pain from a VBA dissection in progress seeking care before their stroke. Regardless, this is an extremely rare condition with risk factors that may include yoga, painting ceilings and nose blowing.

The reference to ‘at least 700 cases” is not based on research published in any peer reviewed literature.

Statement that Dr Holt had surveyed “chiropractors in this country” and two-thirds said they would treat asthma and ear infections

[58] NZCA argued that this was inaccurate because Dr Holt had only surveyed 13 people. The information provided by Dr Holt (see paragraph [33]) confirms this.

The NZCA and the Authority consider that to present the statements of 13 people as being the opinion of an entire profession is highly misleading.
The letter attempts to position the chiropractic profession as “anti-science” and then presents the results of an “informal analysis of current material”. The ‘overwhelming consensus’ Gilbey and Holt refer to is indeed present on skeptic blogsites. However, the portrayal of chiropractic as cultist, unscientific, and having a philosophy incompatible with modern medicine selectively ignores the findings of many independent government enquiries\(^5\text{-}^8\) and the World Health Organization\(^9\) which have recommended the use of chiropractic care in selected circumstances. It also contradicts the opinions of many independent agencies, including the American College of Surgeons\(^10\) along with findings published in the journal of the American Academy of Family Physicians that encouraged family physicians to positively “re-evaluate their relationship with chiropractors”\(^11\). In light of this the NZCA would ask readers that they question these aspects of Gilbey and Holt’s letter published in the New Zealand Medical Journal.

The NZCA defends the right to free speech but does not consider the spread of inaccuracies, innuendo or the selective presentation of research under the guise of academic debate to be valid.

James Burt
Chiropractor
Rotorua

David Owen
Chiropractor
Whakatane

On behalf of the New Zealand Chiropractors’ Association

References:

4. \url{http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/761451-overview}
10. \url{http://www.facs.org/fellows_info/statements/st-2.html}