An Awakening to Chiropractic History

By Joseph Keating Jr., PhD

Several publications in the past two years have begun to bring the story of chiropractic out of the closet and into the realm of legitimate scholarship. This work is occurring within and external to the profession, and covers a great deal of varied terrain.

Here are some samples:

Walter Wardwell, PhD, professor emeritus in the department of sociology at the University of Connecticut and an official of the Association for the History of Chiropractic, has authored Chiropractic: History and Evolution of a New Profession. This work is meritorious for its breadth of coverage of the chiropractic century, for its readability, and its extensive documentation. Dr. Wardwell tells the stories we want to hear as well as those we may wish to forget, and does so in a manner and with an organization that makes this volume ideal as a text for coursework in chiropractic history; several chiropractic college instructors have already adopted it for their courses. For those who still operate under the assumption that B.J. Palmer was the only chiropractor in history, there will be many surprises. Published by Mosby, Inc. in 1992, the books sell for about $45.

Something different is offered by J. Stuart Moore, PhD, assistant professor of history at Radford University in Virginia. Based upon his doctoral dissertation in the history of medicine, Dr. Moore’s Chiropractic in America: the History of a Medical Alternative is not an attempt to tell the chiropractic saga in its entirety, but rather an effort to answer several questions via historical scholarship. Most important among these is: How did the chiropractic profession manage to survive, given the many obstacles it has confronted? Especially for those in the profession who tend to glibly dismiss such inquiry with simple-minded explanations (e.g., "It Works! IT WORKS!), Dr. Moore’s contentions may come as a surprise. He suggests that chiropractors have persevered because organized medicine has persecuted the profession. (Wow! Chiropractors owe their survival to medicine?) The book is valuable also for the broad context in which the story of this unique group of healers is placed. Published by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1993, the book sells for about $35.
The doctoral dissertation of Pierre-Luis Gaucher-Peslherbe, DC, PhD, has finally been translated into English and is available from the National College of Chiropractic for about $80. I wish I had a greater understanding for neurophysiology, because this work is a masterful treatise on D.D. Palmer’s theories and their place in the emerging discipline of neurology in the 19th century. Even with my limited background, I found Dr. Gaucher’s volume engaging. For those who have been interested in the evolution of Old Dad Chiro’s thinking, this work, Chiropractic: Early Concepts in Their Historical Setting, will fascinate. There’s a good deal more to the birth of chiropractic than knocking the wax out of Harvey Lillard’s ear!

Steven C. Martin, MD, an assistant professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, New York, is preparing his doctoral dissertation in the history of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. His topic is chiropractic, and he has already authored several fascinating articles on the evolution of the profession. A recent contribution (Martin, 1993) traces the introduction of instruments to the chiropractic profession, and places them within the context of midwestern values and perceptions of science and technology in the late 19th and early 20th century. Martin argues that as medicine evolved from a descriptive to an experimental science, chiropractic adopted an observational epistemology that was consistent with the rural values and religious beliefs then prevalent among its clientele. He credits B.J. with introducing a limited form of "professionalism," and discusses the introduction of spinography and the neurocalomter within the context of mainstream and fringe elements of "electrical medicine."

Meanwhile, several workers within the profession have been developing historical works. The librarians of the David D. Palmer Health Sciences Library (Dennis Petersen, MLS and Glenda Wiese, MLS) are editing the volume Chiropractic: An Illustrated History. Chapter contributions were solicited from a variety of writers, and hundreds of photographs depicting the profession’s course over the past hundred years will be included. Look for this work to be published in November, 1994.

The Association for the History of Chiropractic (AHC) has also been busy. Plans are underway for the 14th Annual Conference on Chiropractic History to be held at New York Chiropractic College’s campus in Seneca Falls in mid-October. Among the papers that will be presented:

"As ever, B.J.: the Palmer-Stoke Correspondence" by J. Stuart Moore, PhD

"Chiropractic goes to Washington: with Dr. Emmett J. Murphy, 1938-1964" by William S. Rehm, DC
"Gloom or boom for chiropractic in its second century? A comparison of the demise of drugless healing professions" by Bart Green, DC

"In the eye of the storm: Dossa Dixon Evins and the NCM debacle" by Jetta Nash, BA

"Oakley Smith’s schism of 1908: the rise and decline of naprapathy" by Ronald P. Beideman, DC

"Shhh!! ... Radiophone station WOC is on the air, 1922-1932" by Joseph C. Keating Jr., PhD

"The establishment and development of chiropractic in Tennessee" by Arthur G. Lensgraf, DC

"Willard Carver, LL.B, DC, 1866-1943: Doctor, lawyer, indian chief, prisoner, and more" by Robert B. Jackson, DC

The conference will also provide an opportunity to visit NYCC’s museum of chiropractic history. Details about the conference can be obtained from the AHC’s Executive Director Alana Callender, MS, c/o Palmer College of Chiropractic, 1000 Brady Street, Davenport, IA 52803. Membership in the AHC costs $50/year ($20/year for students) and includes a subscription to the AHC’s journal, Chiropractic History.

Reference

Martin SC. Chiropractic and the social context of medical technology. 1895-1925. Technology & Culture 1993; 34(4): 808-34.

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