

*JCCA 2007; 51(2):91–9. Page 5. An audit of health products and services marketed on chiropractic websites in Alberta and consideration of these practices in the context of chiropractic codes of conduct and ethics.*

*To the Editor:*

The article written by Dr. Page needs to be addressed on several aspects particularly the issue of using the only true commercial site owned by a chiropractor in the study and the reasons for online sales that may be affecting the profession negatively in Alberta. The reader should understand that although there is a sense of greater knowledge in Alberta about the existence of Chiropractors and why Albertans should go see a chiropractor there has, in sad reality, been little to affect the bottom line of a typical solo practice over and above the normal slow growth curve of a clinic in the city or country side. This has forced the ever increasing number of chiropractors eating out of the same pie to look for secondary income from an unregulated internet thereby further blurring the lines of doctor and storeowner by selling goods online as Dr. Page found.

Chiropharma was developed because the clinician must never wear the hat of a salesman and that of a doctor. The web site has been online since 1999 and has evolved to offer chiropractors a place to refer their patients to avoid product liability or the liability of selling on the internet. Insurance companies in Canada do not cover chiropractors for online sales and neither does CCA. It relieves the chiropractor from carrying inventory thereby freeing up space and capital and to deal with the issues of credibility of being a doctor selling what he or she recommends. Chiropractors should focus on selling themselves in the clinic and not someone else's products because patients are not used to going to a doctor to buy something. They are used to taking a prescription out the door and following doctors' recommendations.

This commercial site came into being to avoid this pitfall in chiropractic by selling online to the end user. As a result it has won awards for best professional site with easiest consumer navigation and in-house online payment verification and processing. The professionalism and award winning status of the site was passed in favor of selling oven gloves and utensils to handicapped individuals that were not put in context. The site also distances

the owners involvement but does state that he "seeks out credible products worthy of selling to the chiropractic patient" as any responsible owner would to build trust. It also does not link a clinic directly to the site. The owner is listed, along with many other chiropractic links, as a sponsor deep within the site with a brief descriptor to offer further transparency and credibility to the online store.

Now the chiropractic patient has a much needed online commercial chiropractic portal that will act as a patient retention tool with foundations in chiropractic philosophy. All other similar, true commercial sites are owned by physiotherapists or medical doctors. Another advantage is it allows the patient and doctor to remain together through a subsequent follow up visit. Chiropractors using the prescription pad have an increased adherence to treatment from the patient simply because the seed of conflict of interest is never present in the mind of the patient.

In all, chiropractors should refer out for what they recommend – be it to chiropharma or another credible source. If they attempt to sell online they must be ethical and should distance themselves from this secondary business. The clinic web site should not be vague, sell useless gadgets, use scare tactics or sell diapers. It should be informative about the clinic and perhaps link to commercial sites or sources of information. More studies about the effectiveness of chiropractic web sites will need to be performed by a combination of individuals that understand the complexities of online sales as well as researchers as there may be a need to come to an understanding within the profession about purely commercial sites and clinic web sites and their use. Remember selling in our clinics blurs the doctor patient relationship and in a lawyer's office is construed as a conflict of interest. I thank Dr. Page for bringing this issue to light.

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*To the Editor in reply:*

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the letter submitted by Dr. Espanioli.

From Dr. Espanioli's letter, it seems we both hypothe-

size that chiropractors may be selling health related products in an effort to generate practice revenue. Similarly, we share the view that this practice may put chiropractors' roles as health professionals in direct conflict with their roles as merchants.

The websites included for review in the earlier audit were identified by searching public directory listings for "Chiropractors." Dr. Espanioli's commercial website was listed with his name and in conjunction with a chiropractic and massage clinic, and therefore was included in the audit.

Chiropharma© bills itself as "North America's biggest online shopping site for Health and Beauty Aids and sells a wide range of products which are related to greater and lesser degrees to the discipline of chiropractic. Although the site is not explicitly endorsed by a chiropractor, it does play on the chiropractic title and the chiropractic clinic associated with this practitioner is described as a sponsor of Chiropharma©.

The Canadian Chiropractic Association's Code of Eth-

ics and Conduct, followed by the Alberta College and Association of Chiropractors, provides guidelines on the sale of health products. Accordingly, if Dr. Espanioli is concerned with the ethics of the association between his professional affiliation and his online business, consultation with this body may be useful.

As I suggested in the original article, retailing of health products by health care professionals such as chiropractors, potentially places them in a conflict of interest position. If products are sold by health care professionals, I believe these professionals have an ethical responsibility to ensure there is a clear body of scientific evidence to support the product's efficacy and safety, and an additional responsibility to ensure consumers are fully informed and advised about product use.

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