

AN AUDIT OF HEALTH PRODUCTS ADVERTISED FOR SALE ON CHIROPRACTIC WEB SITES IN CANADA AND CONSIDERATION OF THESE PRACTICES IN THE CONTEXT OF CANADIAN CHIROPRACTIC CODES OF ETHICS AND CONDUCT

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study describes the extent to which chiropractors with Web sites practicing in Canada advertise health products for sale and considers this practice in the context of chiropractic codes of ethics and conduct.

Methods: Chiropractic Web sites in Canada were identified using a public online business directory (Canada 411). The Web sites were searched, and an inventory of the health products for sale was taken. The influences of type of practice and province of practice on the sale of health product were assessed. Textual comments about health product marketing were summarized. National and provincial codes of ethics were reviewed, and the content on health product advertising was summarized.

Results: Two hundred eighty-seven Web sites were reviewed. Just more than half of the Web sites contained information on health products for sale ($n = 158$, 54%). Orthotics were advertised most often ($n = 136$ practices, 47%), followed by vitamins/nutritional supplements ($n = 53$, 18%), pillows and supports ($n = 40$, 14%), and exercise/rehabilitation products ($n = 20$, 7%). Chiropractors in solo or group chiropractic practices were less likely to advertise health products than those in multidisciplinary practice ($P < .001$), whereas chiropractors in BC were less likely to advertise nutritional supplements ($P < .01$). Provincial codes of ethics and conduct varied in their guidelines regarding health product sales.

Conclusions: Variations in codes of ethics and in the proportions of practitioners advertising health products for sales across the country suggest that opinions may be divided on the acceptability of health product sales. Such practices raise questions and considerations for the chiropractic profession. (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2009;32:485-492)

Key Indexing Terms: *Chiropractic; Professional Ethics; Codes of Ethics; Marketing*

The chiropractic profession in Canada is facing a number of challenges. Data from Ontario have shown that despite continued growth in the number of chiropractic graduates, the use rates for chiropractic are remaining relatively stable.¹ Recent years have seen reduced insurance coverage in some provinces for chiropractic care,

limiting access for consumers.^{2,3} The numbers of other complementary and alternative practitioners such as massage therapists and acupuncturists are increasing, competing for market share with chiropractors.⁴ These factors may contribute to a reduced patient-to-chiropractor ratio, which in turn may lead to reduced income for practitioners. It has been reported that chiropractors are retailing a range of health care products,⁴⁻⁶ possibly as another means of generating revenue.

Data from a recent audit of chiropractic Web sites in Alberta suggest that the marketing of health products and services by chiropractors is common. Almost two thirds (65%) of the 56 chiropractic Web sites surveyed indicated that the practices offered health products for sale. Orthotics were the products most often sold, followed by pillows and supports, and then vitamins/natural supplements.⁵

The sale of health products by chiropractors is guided by the codes of ethics of either provincial or national professional associations. At the time this study was undertaken, there are some variations across the country, with the code followed by practitioners in British Columbia being most restrictive, specifically prohibiting the sale of nutritional supplements, vitamins, and minerals.⁷

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The retailing of health products is an important issue that warrants consideration when defining the professional conduct boundaries of health care practitioners. These actions may be considered by some as being at odds with the professionals' ethical obligations to act in patients' best interests and avoid actions that may cause conflict of interest.^{8,9} Although the recommendation of health products should be based on a clinical value that addresses a patient's needs, a financial interest in the sale of that product might influence the practitioner's behavior, and the patient's best interest has the potential of being compromised. Little is known about the current practices of retailing health products by chiropractors in Canada.

The purpose of this study is to provide a preliminary description of the extent to which Canadian chiropractors are selling and marketing health products as evidenced by advertisements or offers on Web sites. This study also describes and discusses the guidelines offered by Canadian national and provincial chiropractic codes of ethics and conduct relating to health product sales and advertising.

METHODS

Consistent with the Tricouncil Policy Statement, this study did not require ethics review [Section 1.A., Article 1.1 (c)].¹⁰ Chiropractic Web sites in Canada were identified using a publicly available business directory, Canada 411. This online directory provides contact information (name, address, phone numbers) for chiropractors offering services in the country. Chiropractors with Web sites can choose to have their URLs listed in this directory for an additional fee.

In 2009, the Canadian Chiropractic Association stated there were 7000 licensed chiropractors in Canada.¹¹ Searching for "chiropractor" in the Canada 411 directory in June of 2007 yielded 8401 listings, suggesting most chiropractors were represented. These online listings were reviewed to find practices with Web sites. Once identified, the Web addresses were recorded and the Web sites were audited. All health products and services offered through the practice were recorded on a standard inventory form. The results were summarized descriptively using proportions. The association between the type of practice and the advertising of health products and the province of practice (British Columbia vs other) on sale of health products was evaluated using the χ^2 statistic. Comments made about the products available for sale were also recorded and summarized using content analysis.

The Canadian Chiropractic Association (CCA) is a national voluntary organization that represents Canada's licensed chiropractors. Approximately 87% (N = 6100) of the approximately 7000 chiropractors in Canada are members. The national code of ethics and conduct of the CCA, available online from the CCA's Web site, was reviewed, and its content relating to the sale of health products was summarized. Six provincial associations have

Table 1. Health products sales on chiropractic Web sites in Canada

Province	Chiropractic Web sites identified	Selling health products at clinic	Link to a product site
BC	45	33 (73%)	15
AB	30	20 (67%)	7
SK	—	—	—
MB	9	3 (33%)	4
ON	152	88 (58%)	79
QB	34	3 (9%)	4
NFLD	1	0	0
NS	14	7 (50%)	4
PEI	—	—	—
NB	2	1 (50%)	1
Total	287	155 (54%)	114 (40%)

BC, British Columbia; AB, Alberta; SK, Saskatchewan; MB, Manitoba; ON, Ontario; QB, Quebec; NFLD, Newfoundland; NS, Nova Scotia; NB, New Brunswick; PEI, Prince Edward Island.

developed their own codes of ethics and conduct (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia), and these are also available on their Web sites. The Code of Ethics of Chiropractors in Quebec is found within the Chiropractic Act (RSQ, c. C-26, S. 87) available online. The provincial codes were reviewed, and their content on the sale of health products was summarized.

RESULTS

From the 8401 listings for chiropractors, 225 were nonchiropractic, leaving 8176 chiropractic listings. From these listings, 929 Web addresses were found. Upon review, 637 were nonchiropractic, duplicates, or inaccessible, leaving 292 unique active Web addresses for audit. No Web sites were found using Canada 411 for either Saskatchewan or Manitoba. For these 2 provinces, we searched the Yellow Page print directories for the 2 larger cities in each province (Saskatoon and Regina, and Brandon and Winnipeg, respectively). Nine Web addresses were found for Manitoba, whereas none were found for Saskatchewan, resulting in a total of 301 Web sites.

Three sites represented multiple, franchised clinics. It was not impossible to determine who owned and operated these clinics, nor was it possible to identify the practitioners or products by clinic site. Therefore, these sites were excluded, reducing the number of practice sites reviewed to 298. Two sites were resource or product sites for practitioners, not consumers, and these were also dropped, reducing the number of chiropractic sites to 296. Eleven sites comprised clinics that were clearly owned by other health professionals (eg, massage therapists, physiotherapists, naturopaths) and were dropped, leaving 285 Web sites. In contrast, 2 Web addresses reported on 2 clinics each, and it was possible to code practitioners and products by site. The final tally of clinics reviewed was 287. The number of clinic Web sites identified for each province is shown in Table 1.

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