

The John A. Sweaney Lecture: Washington DC, March 2017, Given by Dr Geoff Outerbridge. Our Highest Level of Contribution: Doing the Right Thing, the Right Way, for the Right Reason



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ABSTRACT

The following is The John A. Sweaney Lecture delivered by Dr Geoff Outerbridge at the Biannual Meeting of the World Federation of Chiropractic in Washington, DC, on March 14, 2017. (*J Chiropr Humanit* 2017;24:49-53)

Key Indexing Terms: *Chiropractic; Congresses as Topic*

INTRODUCTION

A wise chiropractor once told me, “Every time you learn something, think of how it will benefit your patients.” I have kept this amazing advice in my mind throughout my education and career, and it has served me well over the years.

After I graduated from Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, I wanted to treat as many patients as possible since I knew there was much to learn from them. For 8 years, I ran a multidisciplinary clinic in Ottawa, Canada, until I was introduced to Scott Haldeman. His unwavering vision and dedication to founding World Spine Care (WSC) was incredibly inspiring. At that moment, I gave up my professional life as I knew it in order to join him in an amazing adventure—one that would help those in underserved communities gain access to high-quality spine care.

During my first visit to Botswana, Africa, Scott’s wife, Joan, asked me why I was willing to give up my practice and take the risk of plunging head first into the unknown. At that time, WSC was just past the idea stage, and there were no assurances of funding or success. Until faced with the question, I had not thought about my reasons for action or indeed any risk. I just knew this was the path I was supposed to take for better or for worse.

The spirit of adventure runs in my family. My grandfather was a Methodist minister who left Canada and sailed to Japan in 1910. There, he taught at Kwansai Gakuin University in Nishinomya for 40 years (Fig 1). My uncle was born, and grew up, in Japan and eventually trained as an orthopedic surgeon. He followed in my grandfather’s footsteps and traveled to China with the United Church, where he spent 13 years teaching medicine and orthopedics at the West China Union University (Fig 2).

I grew up hearing their stories, immersed in their photographs, and captivated not only by their adventures, but by the magnitude of what they had done for others. I saw my predecessors as true pioneers who made sacrifices and took enormous risks to offer their services to humankind. Their stories were wrapped in an ethos of serving their fellow man, and this spirit of service was something that I became aware of at a very young age. For example, the Kwansai Gakuin motto “Mastery for Service” was hung on the wall at our home.

When Joan Haldeman asked me about my career decision, I realized that my family history was the foundation for my reason. The opportunity with WSC would fit me perfectly. I had always wanted to follow in my grandfather’s and uncle’s footsteps. And as it turned out, I was embarking on an amazing adventure with someone who possessed that same unswerving spirit of service.

Anyone who has worked with Scott Haldeman knows what sacrifices he has made and the work he has done to support the chiropractic profession, chiropractors, and those suffering from spinal disorders. When my wife, young son, and I first arrived in Botswana to set up the first clinics, it was clear to me why I was there. I was there to serve patients. And that became the focus of my work and all that WSC would come to stand for.

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Fig 1. Howard Wilkinson and Edna Outerbridge with colleagues and children Ralph and Dorothy at Kwansei Gakuin University, Nishinomya, Japan, circa 1915.

I believe strongly that every discussion, every decision, and every action within our profession should begin and end with the patient. When faced with a dilemma or decision, we should ask: “How will this benefit our patients?” If we keep our focus on the patient, as clinicians and as a profession, we will always do the right thing, in the right way, and for the right reason.

The focus and drive for our actions should not be on what benefits the profession. Instead, the profession will benefit when we focus on the patient. As well, the focus cannot be on financial gain or recognition. Instead, recognition comes when we focus on the patient. There is no better

marketing strategy than putting the patient at the center of your care. The focus cannot be on establishing the role of chiropractic in the health care world. Instead, our role will be established and respected when we focus on the patient. If we always ask, “How is what we do benefiting the patient?” we will always do the right thing, in the right way, and for the right reason.

THE RIGHT THING

Our profession has much to offer in health care. However, I do not think we are currently offering our “highest level of contribution.”¹ In most countries, chiropractors see about 10% of the population.²⁻⁷ Chiropractic patients in North America are mostly healthy, wealthy, and educated.²⁻⁴ Caring for those in need wherever they are is a lofty ideal, but we need to expand beyond the healthy, wealthy, and educated. I believe that our highest level of contribution lies where there is the most suffering and the least access to care.

Low back pain is the leading cause of disability worldwide, and it is estimated that almost a billion people worldwide are suffering from spine pain.⁸ Back and neck pain contributes more to the global burden of disease than HIV, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, malaria, stroke, lung and breast cancer combined, lower respiratory infections, and traffic-related injuries.⁸ In the United States, those with lower income and less education have 4 times higher rates of chronic pain.⁹ In low- and middle-income countries, back and neck pain have an even higher prevalence.¹⁰ The poor and uneducated around the world have less access to effective spine care.¹¹

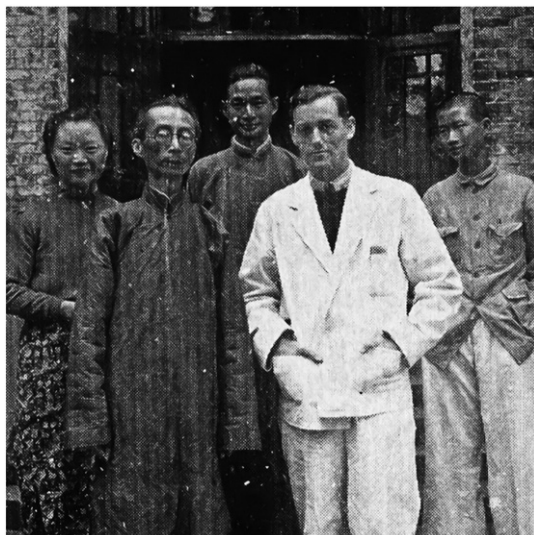


Fig 2. Dr Ralph E. Outerbridge with the Hsieh family after a treatment at the mission hospital, Junghsien, China, 1943.

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