

# Pediatric Patients in Swiss Chiropractic Clinics: A Questionnaire Survey

Mette Hobaek Siegenthaler, DC, MSc

## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study was to investigate practice characteristics of chiropractors who treat pediatric patients in Swiss chiropractic clinics.

**Methods:** An online survey questionnaire was created and tested for face and content validity. Participation by Swiss chiropractors was voluntary and anonymous and completed November to December 2015. The data were analyzed using SPSS. The analysis consisted of descriptive statistics.

**Results:** The sample consisted of 144 chiropractors, which represented a 53% response rate, and 98% of the responding practitioners treated patients younger than age 18. The proportion of pediatric patients treated was 8.7%. The most common pediatric age groups were schoolchildren and adolescents, with infants younger than 6 months being the third most common. Musculoskeletal complaints were the most common conditions treated in all age groups. In children younger than 2 years old, nonmusculoskeletal conditions were well represented. Prophylactic examination was common among children 6 years and younger. A total of 61% of responding chiropractors received direct referrals from medical doctors and 56% received direct referrals from pediatricians. The most common age groups for referrals from pediatricians were schoolchildren and adolescents. Only 15% of the chiropractors wrote reports about their pediatric patients to their pediatrician often or regularly; 90% of the responding chiropractors stated they rarely or never refer to a pediatric specialist, and 80% of the chiropractors have never or have rarely been invited to attend medical congresses or to teach the pediatric health care community about chiropractic care for children.

**Conclusion:** The majority of chiropractors in Switzerland treat pediatric patients, most commonly schoolchildren and adolescents for musculoskeletal disorders. (J Manipulative Physiol Ther 2017;xx:1-9)

**Key Indexing Terms:** *Chiropractic; Practice; Questionnaire; Pediatrics; Patients*

## INTRODUCTION

Surveys on chiropractic pediatric care have been undertaken in some countries to map standards and needs in the profession, with most originating from North America and Europe.<sup>1-6</sup> In Switzerland, however, no such survey on chiropractic pediatrics has been previously conducted. In 2009, a Swiss job analysis survey of chiropractors was conducted to identify specific characteristics of chiropractic practice to ensure that relevant key competencies in practice were covered in the undergraduate and postgraduate chiropractic program that started at the University of Zürich in 2008.<sup>7</sup> A key finding of this Swiss survey was that 91% of responding chiropractic practitioners reported treating patients between the ages of 6 and

17, and 78% reported treating children younger than 5 years of age. Furthermore, 22% of Swiss chiropractors reported receiving direct referrals from pediatricians “sometimes” (1-3 patients per month), “often” (1-2 per week), or “routinely” (>2 per week). These numbers are higher than those reported in surveys conducted in other countries,<sup>7</sup> and they are thus of great interest to the profession and suggest that a further investigation into pediatric patients in Swiss chiropractic clinics is needed.

Switzerland is in a unique position within the international chiropractic profession because it is the only country where chiropractic is one of the 5 government-recognized medical professions (medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, pharmacology, and chiropractic). Furthermore, Switzerland has the first chiropractic program that is part of a faculty of medicine.<sup>7</sup> With the findings from the Swiss job analysis together with the unique status of Swiss chiropractors, the chiropractic profession in Switzerland could try to take a more active role in monitoring musculoskeletal development in children and take a more active part in pediatric research.

To do so, a detailed investigation into the pediatric patients in Swiss chiropractic clinics was needed. The survey of the pediatric patients in Swiss chiropractic clinics

Chiropractor, Holbeinpraxis, Swiss Academy for Chiropractic, Berne, Switzerland.

Corresponding author: Mette Hobaek Siegenthaler, DC, MSc, Holbeinstrasse 65, 4051, Basel, Switzerland. Tel.: +41 61 278911. (e-mail: [Mette.dc@icloud.com](mailto:Mette.dc@icloud.com)).

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that is presented in this paper is based on that of Humphreys et al,<sup>7</sup> and its rationale was to consider pediatric patients in Swiss chiropractic clinics in greater detail. Such investigations help to map potential improvements to chiropractic undergraduate, postgraduate, and continuing education; to identify possible implications for future chiropractic research; to investigate the professional relationship between chiropractors and other pediatric health care providers; and to better understand interdisciplinary relations. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate practice characteristics of chiropractors who treat pediatric patients in Swiss chiropractic clinics.

## METHODS

The author composed all the questions in this questionnaire, which were based on questions from other surveys of chiropractic and pediatrics found in a literature review conducted in February 2015<sup>1,3,4,6</sup> and from the Swiss job analysis conducted by Humphreys et al.<sup>7</sup> To ensure the credibility of the data, the questions were drawn up in line with the recommendations for questionnaire surveys reported by Choi and Pak.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, to prevent a tendency for respondents to choose 1 of the first 2 response options, as far as possible the author tried to minimize the number of answer categories presented to the respondent. A large number of answer categories were only presented to respondents in questions that addressed the most common conditions treated. To ensure that the questionnaire was representative of the pediatric patient, it was important in those questions to include every possible condition. To prevent respondents from being puzzled by any of the questions, a short definition was provided before each question in cases in which a clear cutoff or definition was needed.

The final design of the questionnaire was sent in paper form to 6 chiropractors for evaluation of face and content validity, and necessary modifications were made. In addition, the 6 chiropractors were asked to write down the exact time needed to fill out the questionnaire. Although the questionnaire took an average of 15 minutes to complete, after discussion with the Director of the Swiss Academy of Chiropractic, it was decided not to shorten it because other surveys in Switzerland, such as the job analysis survey,<sup>7</sup> had received good response rates despite being time consuming. The questionnaire was divided into 6 main sections: demographic data, practice characteristics, patient characteristics, referral patterns, working relationship with other health care providers, and education in pediatrics.

An application for ethical approval to the ethics committee in Nordwestschweiz, Switzerland, was submitted in September 2015, and the survey was judged as ethically sound and considered exempt. However, to obtain a declaration of absence of health hazards needed for

publication, it was stated in the cover letter that the participating chiropractors were, by returning the questionnaire, giving the author informed consent to their participation in the research project.

The survey questionnaire was then copied to an independent online survey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) and sent to the target population: all chiropractors in Switzerland who were members of the Swiss association at the time of the study. The e-mail addresses of the target population were provided by the executive secretary of the Swiss Association of Chiropractors. In a cover letter, the chiropractors were informed about the anonymity of the survey: The completed questionnaire was sent directly to the survey expert by clicking the "submit box," and the survey expert forwarded each questionnaire to the author identified only by a number. In this way, the author did not know who had filled out which questionnaire.

The questionnaire was sent out on November 5, 2015. A first reminder was sent out on November 16, 2015, and a second on December 3, 2015. The data were analyzed using SPSS Version 20 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). The analysis consisted of descriptive statistics. Additionally a *t* test was used to calculate the proportion of pediatric patients in the French- and German-speaking part of Switzerland.

## RESULTS

### Sample

The sample consisted of 144 chiropractors, which represented a 53% response rate. Of these, 62% (*n* = 89) were male. Most respondents (67%) were from the German-speaking part of Switzerland, 30% were from the French-speaking area, and only very few (3.5%) were from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. The most common period for doctors of chiropractic to have been in practice was between 5 and 15 years, followed by 16 to 25 years.

Only 3 respondents stated that they did not treat children. Thus, 98% of the responding chiropractic practitioners treated patients younger than age 18. Furthermore, 1 chiropractor only answered one-third of the questionnaire and for this reason was excluded. Thus, the sample for analysis consisted of 140 chiropractors.

The number of pediatric patients, as a proportion of all patients, treated in chiropractic clinics was 8.7%. Although there was significant variability, the pediatric patient base in most of the chiropractic clinics was less than 25% of the total number of patients seen. Comparing the French- and German-speaking parts of Switzerland, there was no significant difference in the proportion of pediatric patients (*t* test, *P* = .682): French,  $9.4 \pm 6.6\%$ ; German,  $8.5 \pm 13.6\%$ . A comparison was not made with the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland because of the very small number of chiropractors practicing in this region.

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