

An Economic Outlook for Chiropractic in the US.

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Since its inception into the health care marketplace in 1895 chiropractic has grown to be the third largest primary care, portal of entry health care profession in the US next to medicine and dentistry¹. Classified as Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) chiropractic represents the largest, most regulated and best recognized of the CAM professions.² Today in the US there are between 53,000³ and 60,000⁴ practicing chiropractors with jobs in solo practice, group practice and medical health facilities.

The preference for chiropractic care among the health care consumer has grown significantly over the past 15 years. In early 1992, David Eisenberg MD, director of the Osher Research Center at Harvard Medical School, conducted the first of three ground breaking studies on the utilization of CAM in the US. These studies revealed that CAM, once considered not a mainstream approach to health care, was in fact the “invisible mainstream” as visit to CAM providers were occurring at a rate of 2:1 to medical doctors.⁵ In 1990 33.8 % of the population indicated using some form of CAM. This increased to a utilization rate of 42% by 1997.^{5,6,7} While Eisenberg’s study included all types of CAM providers, CAM being classified as “anything not taught in US medical schools”, his study found that with regard to specifically chiropractic care the majority of those who used CAM chose chiropractic care (30.5%) which translated into 192 million visits per year. The most recent study released in 2006 estimated that as much as 20% of the US population used chiropractic care and clearly demonstrates a growing demand for more conservative, natural approaches to health.⁸

The increasing demand for natural, more conservative approaches to health care that continues to be evident in the marketplace creates a favorable employment outlook for the profession. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics employment of chiropractors is expected to increase 14 percent between 2006 and 2016, “faster than the average for all occupations.”⁹ A wide range in salaries have been reported and varies significantly with length of time in practice and employment circumstance. In 2007 the median net practice income for all chiropractors was reported to be \$107,500¹⁰ while in 2006 median net practice income annual earnings of salaried chiropractors was \$65,220.¹¹

Compensation for chiropractic services has a varied history. First experiencing eligibility for third party pay in the early 1970’s with Medicare, chiropractic coverage has grown to be included either as a core benefit or affinity plan in virtually all traditional insurance policies with as many as 87% of all insured American workers having coverage for chiropractic services in their health care plans.¹² In an era of increasing constraints among third party payers all health professions will be affected to varying degrees.

Chiropractic's history, however, is one where the consumer expects to pay for either a sizeable portion, or all, of the services rendered. An important observation to support this fact is Eisenberg's finding that consumers of chiropractic services paid 12.2 billion dollars in out-of-pocket expenses in 1997 (uncovered services).⁵ According to the author this exceeds the 1997 out-of-pocket expenditure for all US hospitalizations. Based upon this data the outlook for new chiropractors and the chiropractic profession are expected to be good.

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