



STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: SUBLUXATION

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Introduction

As a student of chiropractic it is required that we learn and use all the appropriate terminology so that we may demonstrate our understanding of the terms to our educators, be able to effectively communicate within and across health professions and be able to simplify and explain these concepts to future patients. The concept of subluxation offers several unique challenges when applying it to a multidisciplinary learning environment.

... the different understandings of subluxation present challenges for student learning.'

Defining Subluxation

The chiropractic definition of subluxation has been broad since its inception. A brief history of the definition can shed light onto current difficulties that students face when applying this concept to our learning.

Some (1) date the medical use of subluxation as early as 1863, over 30 years before the genesis of chiropractic. Johnson cited Smith's description 'An Incomplete Luxation, or a Subluxation, is one in which the bone is displaced from the articulation, but not entirely so, some portion of its articulating surface still remaining in the natural cavity or upon its edge.' (2)

In 1906, the first chiropractic textbook was published by Lawrence Press Company and here the chiropractic subluxation was described as 'When a vertebral joint is normal it is capable of a certain definite field of motion over which its articular surfaces travel in performing the various movements to which it is subjected. Having as it does a circumscribed field of motion it must also have a center of motion, and when subluxation occurs it may be likened to a wheel, the hub of which is not in the center.' (3)

Several months later, the Palmer School of Chiropractic published 'A Chiropractic sub-luxation is a partial dislocation, slightly separated from its articulating surfaces. This condition does not necessarily involve a fracture. The subluxation partially occludes the intervertebral foramin, the dislocation completely. It is the partial sub-luxation that produces pressures upon nerves as they emanate thro this opening, hence impulses are hindered, disease its result.' (4)

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In a more recent definition of subluxation, the *Association of Chiropractic Colleges* defines it as 'a complex of functional and/or structural and/or pathological articular changes that compromise neural integrity and may influence organ system function and general health', (5) while the *New Zealand Chiropractors' Association* define it as 'the impairment of optimal expression of your nervous system caused by physical, biochemical, or psychological dis-stress' (6)

This demonstrates the diversity in the definition of the word subluxation since its earliest appearance which persist to this day. This allows for a large degree of ambiguity when using the word and makes it difficult to ascertain whether or not a subluxation is purely mechanical in nature, if there should be a neurological/visceral component attached and whether the concept applies strictly to the spine, or if it can be applied to the periphery as well. A precise universally agreed upon definition would reduce confusion when using the term, making it significantly easier for students to understand and apply to their studies.

Intra-disciplinary use

Chiropractic students have many different intra-disciplinary learning environments. While the most obvious being the classes that they undertake at university, there are also the student-to-student interactions as well as the student-to-practitioner interactions as many students will participate in observations and work as a chiropractic assistant.

Having such a broad definition of subluxation, each chiropractic practice will usually have an agreed upon definition amongst their own group of practitioners. When being a part of an established practice, whether that be through work or observation, students are often required to change the context of the word to suit that environment. This can create conflict and confusion with a student's understanding as the concept may be applied in a more narrow or broad scope to which they are accustomed to.

Within the university setting there has been a push to use other terms such as *Segmental Joint Dysfunction* (SJD) or *chiropractic joint dysfunction* over the term *subluxation*. While terms such as SJD may be more strictly defined, they do not conform with the current profession of chiropractic. This adds complexity as students have multiple terms for what may potentially be the exact same concept. Also, in trying to transition into the use of these new terms, students may find themselves confined to using the term within the university setting as it may result in a loss of ability to effectively communicate with chiropractors in community.

Amongst the student cohort, subluxation will often have the same interpretation as we share the same curriculum. As such, students can engage with each other and share ideas with little or no difficulty. However, if a student were to participate in learning outside the university environment, it may alter their perception of subluxation thus altering their ability to communicate with other students.

Interdisciplinary Use

As each discipline has its own area of expertise, it is seldom that a single discipline can solely treat and manage every presenting patient. As a chiropractic student, it is important that we can learn to successfully communicate with other disciplines. This enables us to effectively work together combining our knowledge and skills to achieve better patient outcomes. This also gives us the opportunity to refer a patient to a more suitable discipline when the presenting complaint is outside our field of expertise.

As the chiropractic definition of subluxation differs from the non-chiropractic definition, to avoid confusion we may need to either explain our use of subluxation to each different practitioner, or change the terminology we use so that it is more closely aligned with other disciplines.

Chiropractic students may have difficulty trying to explain the concept of subluxation to other disciplines as it is intimately tied to our unique philosophy which other disciplines do not adhere to, opening the path for misinterpretation. If we were to change the terminology, there is still every chance any new terminology may not fully encompass what we are trying to convey. Either way these difficulties have the potential to deter students from seeking advice outside of the profession limiting their exposure and understanding of other modalities.

Clinical Application

Chiropractors are primary practitioners, and as such everything that we learn at university is to prepare us with the knowledge and skills to both diagnose and manage patients. This means that we need to have the ability to formulate Differential Diagnoses (DDx), screen for potential serious underlying pathology, develop and implement a treatment plan, as well as refer to other disciplines when necessary.

When applying the concept of subluxation in terms of the cause of all dis-ease, formulation of DDx often becomes redundant and the treatment plan will nearly always be the same for each patient, i.e. adjust subluxations. This undermines a large portion of a student's university education and calls into question the education requirements. Practical skills such as soft tissue techniques, exercise rehabilitation, the application of physiological therapeutics and perhaps even the ability to take vital signs would not be fully utilised. Theoretical components such as microbiology, pathology and understanding of basic pharmacology would also become less important as an understanding of these areas is going to have little effect on your management plan.

When applying the concept of subluxation in terms of mechanical dysfunction, while we can utilise more of our university education, we lose ties to our philosophy and narrow the scope of the chiropractic adjustment. The identification and adjustment of subluxations is the root of chiropractic. It is the founding identity on which chiropractic was built. Simplifying a subluxation to purely a mechanical term is to rob the profession of both our history and our identity. In this case, subluxation may as well be SJD and an adjustment a manipulation which then creates the question '*what is a chiropractor?*' This has the potential to create within the student an identity crisis as we lose the distinguishing characteristic that separates us from other manual therapies.

It is important to note that not every chiropractor or aspiring student is going to strictly follow one or the other and that there are multiple variations in-between.

Conclusion

The concept of subluxation adds complexity to a student's learning. A more universally accepted definition of the concept would alleviate this problem. Whilst different terms for subluxation may make it superficially easier to communicate with other disciplines, new terminology will still present with its own problems within the profession. The clinical application of subluxation in terms of the cause of all dis-ease can make portions of our education seem insignificant, but as subluxation is the foundation of our profession, a loss of this concept may cause a student to lose sight of what they will become after completing their degree.

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