

The Four Realms and Purpose: Setting standards 'above the line'

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Narrative: The Australian College of Chiropractic has established a council representing four aspects of Chiropractic: philosophy, science, art, and practice. This paper briefly outlines its purpose and goals.

Indexing terms: Chiropractic; philosophy; science; art; practice; Australian College of Chiropractic.

The vision for the Four Realms

Congruent, integrated chiropractic educational experience that amplifies ACC's mission

Purpose of the Four Realms

To ensure Chiropractic principles are integrated throughout the curriculum and operations of ACC.

Terms of Reference

The Four Realms (4R) is a committee of the President comprising of the unit leaders of philosophy, life sciences, technique acquisition, and professional practice. Ex officio members are the CEO, Academic Dean, and Academic Operations Manager. 4R meet quarterly and is chaired by the President.

... sublaxation removal must require both philosophical understanding and the physical application of force ...'



Rationale

The pressure of accreditation can lead an institution to deliver only accreditation standards and competencies within a programme of study. However, accreditation requirements are bare minimum standards for the safe and ethical conduct of health practitioners. An accrediting

agency's primary responsibility is towards the safety of the public making risk mitigation, identification of clinical flags, and appropriate referral critical to any healthcare programme. To reflect this, accreditation standards maintain an inherently pathogenic model (that is the study of and avoidance of disease) that promotes clinical reasoning algorithms and the objectification of people seeking care to patients suffering disease. This pathogenic approach orbits the medical profession and minimises the role of other professions: their identity, specialised skillsets and knowledge. This flows through into teaching curricula, made worse by an economic view of education where achieving the bare minimal accreditation standards is the ultimate goal rather than the lowest hurdle to be surpassed.

In programmes that chase accreditation standards in this fashion there is no room (let alone economic rationale) for including identity building, development of diverse skills, or savvy business acumen, because fulfilling accreditation criteria is prioritised over these profession-focused domains.

In relation to this, it must be stated that as a teaching institution, and on behalf of the profession, ACC consciously accepts the responsibility of Chiropractors being registered health practitioners in Australia. It is a privilege to gain the trust of government and the Australian people through the process of registration. We accept that our social position, earning capacity, and influence, comes with an inherent power. As a result, we must want to uphold standards of business and practice that reflect this. However, and this is the crucial point, the maintenance of these standards, the ethics, the clinical reasoning, do not define who or what Chiropractic is.

The ethics of healthcare is common to all registered health professionals in Australia. The clinical reasoning algorithms applied for the diagnosis of pathologies are common to all healthcare practitioners globally, as the human form is universally the same, with the same anatomy, physiology and thus pathology. The accreditation standards for institutions, and the registration guidelines for practicing Chiropractors, can be considered as the line that needs to be met for registration and thus as being safe and ethical, not as the threshold that determines ones understanding of, or ability to practice, chiropractic. What makes one a chiropractor must be taught above the line that accreditation standards and registration guidelines represent.

An ill-defined professional identity is a known factor for under- and early post- graduate attrition (Clements et al, 2016; Frary et al, 2022; Haworth, 2021) It may also be implicated in the de-professionalisation of occupations (Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985; Ryan & Ford, 2010) and is one of the key drivers for the establishment of the Australian Chiropractic College. (Sim, 2017, 2018b) Chiropractic provides a salutogenic (study of health) solution. (Coulter et al, 2019; Mittelmark, 2022; Richards, 2020; Sim, 2017)

Various studies have indicated that Chiropractors approach health from a space beyond the treatment of symptoms and subscribe to a 'neo-vitalistic' approach to life, (Brosnan, 2017; Hart, 2016; Richards, 2020; Senzon, 2022) that is that the human is a self-healing, self-organising, self-regulating organism. (Richards, 2020) Glucina et al (2023) and others illustrate up to 70% of Chiropractors subscribe to this philosophical life construct (Campbell research and marketing, 2008; Eaton et al, 2012; Young, 2020) and is a central component of their identity. Glucina et al's work also defined the notion of Chiropractic professional identity, stating it was comprised of several intersecting factors articulating it as '*a Chiropractor's self-perception and ownership of their practice philosophies, roles and functions, and their pride, engagement, and knowledge of their profession*'. (Glucina et al, 2023, p.80)

In terms of defining the Chiropractic profession, the perennial definition often quoted stems from Stephenson's 1927 seminal text as,

'a philosophy, science, and art of things natural; a system of adjusting the segments of the spinal column (vertebrae) by hand only, for the correction of the cause of dis-ease' (p. xiii)

Of the philosophy, art, and science, Stephenson says,

'what it is, how it is done, and why ... Science tells us what it is; art tells us how it is done, and philosophy, the "why" of the other two. According to that, then philosophy must tell us about both science and art' (p. xiv)

It is from this statement that ACC's mission is derived. It is stated as,

'The creation of an exceptional environment for the outstanding education of philosophically informed, technically brilliant, evidence based, practice ready Chiropractors'. (ACC's Strategic Plan 2025-2029, p4)

This statement underpins all actions of the ACC, from its Board of Directors down to the teaching of its units and the operation of the Chiropractic Centre. The mission statement is considered congruent with the philosophies and principles of the College's founders and representative of desires of the college's supporters and field Chiropractors. This mission of ACC is therefore above the line as it relates not just to the satisfaction of accreditation standards but to a strong sense of identity.

ACC's Four Realms is established to ensure that each of the aspects underpinning the profession are represented within the program, namely the philosophy, science, and art of Chiropractic. Additionally, a fourth aspect is included, that of the 'practice' of chiropractic which is seen as the culmination of the three preceding aspects within a student's practice experience. This is effectively ACC's WIL program. In doing so, the Four Realms are providing a method for ensuring the development of a strong professional identity within the student and graduate, as well as a strong sense of coherence and identity within college staff and faculty.

Of the Four Realms, it is the science which is mostly represented in accreditation standards, followed by art, but from a clinical diagnostic perspective, not a Chiropractic perspective. ACC accepts Hart's 2016 definition of chiropractic as, 'the analysis and removal of vertebral subluxation'. Central to this definition is the concept of subluxation and how it is understood and reduced ('analysis and removal'). Subluxation is described both as a philosophical and physical entity (Ebrall, 2024; Gatterman, 2005) and its removal must require both philosophical understanding and the physical application of force.

As a result, ACC envisages the point of difference between its graduates from others in Australia, that is the most important thing that separates them from graduates of other programs as their '*philosophically informed adjusting skills*'. This statement again provokes 'above the line' thinking as there is no requirement in the accreditation standards to teach this perspective of chiropractic.

Operationalising the Four Realms

The Four Realms is operationalised at ACC through four foundational assumptions:

- how ACC defines Chiropractic;
- how ACC assesses and teaches the legislated scope of practice for chiropractors;
- acknowledging chiropractic as beyond therapy;
- and, how ACC positions itself professionally.

Assumption 1: Definition of Chiropractic

In determining a definition of Chiropractic, various professional identity positions have been reviewed. Resultantly, Hart's (2016) definition of Chiropractic as the '*analysis and adjustment of vertebral subluxation*' has been adopted. This reflects the view of ACC's members, the supporters of the College, and the founders of the Chiropractic profession. It also represents most of the Chiropractic profession. (Ebrall, 2024; Glucina, 2023) By defining Chiropractic in this way, ACC is identifying itself as representing a 'focused-scope' position within the profession. (Institute for Alternative Futures, 2013; McDonald, 2009)

Assumption 2: Interpreting legislated scope of practice

The next assumption recognises that there are legislative parameters pertaining to scope of Chiropractic practice, and that there are inherent responsibilities of safety and ethical conduct of registered health professions in Australia. This later part is covered by accreditation requirements discussed earlier. The former part is addressed in two ways: firstly, and in line with its focused-scope identity, ACC delivers a range of Chiropractic techniques used by the profession for the removal of subluxation. Secondly, ACC educates its students on many non-Chiropractic, complimentary approaches used by both Chiropractors and other allied health and medical practitioners. This diversification of practice is known as 'broad-scope' (Institute for Alternative Futures, 2013; McDonald, 2009) and provides graduates with opportunity to experience complimentary therapeutic interventions which, whilst not addressing subluxation, are common within the field and are likely to have been encountered by the people graduates will see. This also satisfies regulatory and political elements encountered by the College.

Assumption 3: Chiropractic beyond therapy

ACC understands both the therapeutic and proactive applications of Chiropractic. ACC recognises that as an intervention Chiropractic can assist with symptomatic concerns of clients.

However, ACC maintains a fundamental philosophy that Chiropractic is of benefit to all people: the symptomatic and the asymptomatic (pathological lens) as well as those striving for better health and living (salutogenic lens).

This philosophy promotes concepts such as Antonovsky's salutogenic 'sense of coherence'; (Vinje et al, 2016) Hettler's social, occupational, intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual 'wellness' (Miller, 2005) and Maslow's 'self-actualisation', (Greene & Burke, 2007) as distinct from only pursuing and maintaining a 'no pain' state or stabilising neuromusculoskeletal pathologies. (Walker, 2016)

Assumption 4: ACC's professional position

It should be noted that whilst ACC provides students with the skills and experience to practice as a Chiropractor with a broad-scope approach, ACC's professional position is a focused-scope approach to Chiropractic. This underpins ACC's commitment to a unique Chiropractic professional identity and to protect the Chiropractic heritage as envisaged by the founders of the College.

Role of each realm

The Four Realms has a responsibility for producing Chiropractors who satisfy ACC's Graduate Capabilities and can teach to the 4 assumptions as outlined above. A central fundamental aspect of this is the development of their personal identity as it relates to being a chiropractor.

Realms in action

To aid in the development of a Chiropractic identity, ACC discusses with its students the concepts of critical thinking versus clinical reasoning. Often conflated, the two are different. Clinical Reasoning is a complex process in which one identifies and prioritises pertinent clinical data to develop a hypothesis and a plan to confirm or refute that hypothesis. It is related to and dependent on Critical Thinking skills, which are defined as one's capacity to engage in higher cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and self-reflection. (Richards, et al 2020)

At its core, critical thinking is philosophical enquiry, it is process for trying to make sense of the world. Critical thinking can be seen as the core skill of the philosopher. Clinical reasoning is vital for a primary health care practitioner but as a Chiropractor, another level of thinking is required. ACC conceives of this as Chiropractic reasoning, the analysis and philosophical overlay that allows a Chiropractor to locate, analyse, and reduce subluxation, whilst being mindful of their regulatory responsibility for pathogenic clinical reasoning. This critical thinking skill sits above the salutogenic v pathogenic dialectic, encouraging a 'both' approach to practice. This concept has been in development at ACC since 2023, being endorsed by ACC's Board of Directors and Academic Board, and shared with executive management, and faculty.

Figure 1, below, resides in ACC's Chiropractic Centre for consultation between students and supervisors.

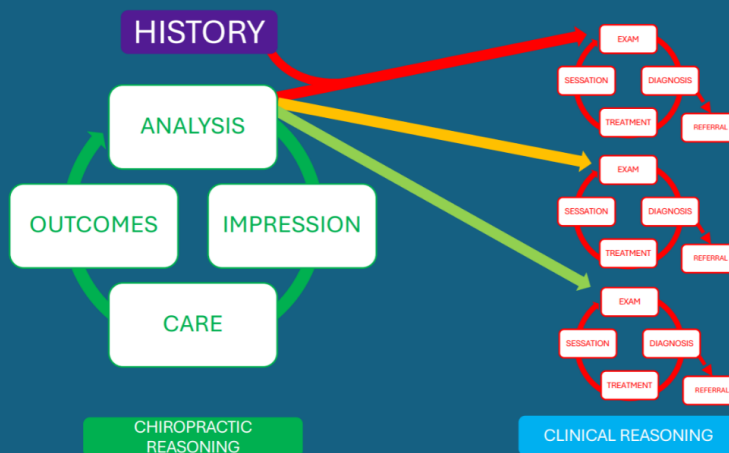
Figure 1: The ACC Critical thinking practice model

CRITICAL THINKING PRACTICE MODEL

This model demonstrates how Chiropractic is guided by **critical thinking** rather than **linear decision making**.

The client history informs ongoing analysis, which interacts dynamically with **clinical impressions, chiropractic decision making**, and **outcomes** to support reflective, adaptable practice.

Color-coded pathways represent levels of clinical complexity:



- **Dark Green** - clients requiring no further investigation or referral, who may be seeking optimal function and the removal of vertebral subluxations. You utilize Chiropractic Reasoning to make day-to-day decisions around their Chiropractic plan.
- **Light Green** - clients may have minor co-existing conditions outside of vertebral subluxations which you may manage internally or in conjunction with other providers, who may be seeking enhancement of their health
- **Yellow** - clients may have chronic co-existing conditions or acute MSK injuries that are under the management of other healthcare providers, however are still safely able to receive Chiropractic and achieve gains in function and health
- **Red** - Emergency or high-risk presentations requiring immediate referral for further investigation or treatment following history or analysis, without which Chiropractic is deemed inappropriate

Chiropractic reasoning is integrative, adaptive and client-centered, in contrast to the linear, protocol-driven nature of conventional pathological **clinical reasoning**. The model highlights the need for continual reassessment, **evidence-informed judgment**, and client-centered care with appropriate referrals at all stages.

Notes:

Institute for Alternative Futures, 2013. *Chiropractic 2025: Divergent Futures*, describes 'broad-scope' as focusing on primary care or specialties dealing with a range of conditions beyond the spine.

Institute for Alternative Futures, 2013. *Chiropractic 2025: Divergent Futures*, describes 'focused-scope' as correcting subluxations in the spine to free the body's self-healing capacity

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