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Are Swiss chiropractors so different? Results of the job analysis survey 2009

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Background

Job analysis surveys of chiropractic practice have been done in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and a few other countries,^{1–3} but never in Switzerland prior to this study. Switzerland is in a unique position within the chiropractic profession worldwide, being the only country where chiropractic is one of the 5 government recognized medical professions (medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, pharmacology and chiropractic). Since 2008, Switzerland has the first chiropractic program that is part of a faculty of medicine.⁴

With the start of a new university-based undergraduate chiropractic program and the impending government accreditation process of the 2 year post-graduate program, a detailed investigation into chiropractic practice in Switzerland was needed. The data from job analysis surveys help to guide the undergraduate, post-graduate and continuing educational chiropractic curricula as well as to inform insurance companies and government agencies about chiropractic practice. Therefore, the purposes of this study were to: (1) identify specific characteristics of chiropractic practice in Switzerland in order to ensure that relevant key competencies particular to practice in this country are covered in the undergraduate and post-graduate chiropractic programs and (2) compare chiropractic practice in Switzerland to other countries who have completed similar surveys.

Methods

Using the National Board of Chiropractic Examiners (US) job analysis survey as a template, and adapting questions from the General Chiropractic Council UK survey, a Swiss questionnaire was created and tested for face and content validity prior to being placed on-line for completion by the 260 members of the Swiss Association for Chiropractic. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and descriptive statistics were calculated.

Results

The response rate was 70%. Fifty-three of the respondents were female (29%) and 130 were male (71%). The most common time period for chiropractors to have been in practice (excluding the 2 year assistantship) was between 5 and 15 years followed by 16–25 years. Most practitioners work between 31 and 50 h per week.

Number of patients treated

The average number of patients treated per week by Swiss chiropractors varies, with 30% treating between 100 and 149 patients per week, 31% treating fewer than 100 patients per week, and 39% treating 150 or more patients per week. The average number of new patients per week also varies, but the most common figure was between 4 and 6 patients. However, 59% of chiropractors see on average 7 or more new patients each week, with 3% seeing over 20. Eighty two per cent of chiropractors stated that they see more female patients than male patients, with males making up between 26% and 50% of their patients.

Patient ages

The most common patients to present are between the ages of 31 and 50 years old followed by the 51–64 year old group. However, 78% of chiropractors report treating at least some children under the age of 5 with 91% of practitioners treating children between the ages of 6 and 17.

Availability

A new patient with an *urgent* complaint is able to obtain an appointment on the same day with 61% of the chiropractors, while 30% of chiropractors are able to see the urgent patient within 1–2 days. A new patient with a *non-urgent* complaint can only get a same day appointment with 13% of the chiropractors, but can be seen within 4 days by 81% of the practitioners.

Length of appointments

The most common time frame allocated for a new patient visit is between 31 and 45 min with 60% of chiropractors reporting this figure. Twenty-three per cent spend between 16 and 30 min with a new patient while 13% spend 46–60 min. Subsequent patient visits usually last between 11 and 15 min for 58% of practitioners, with 29% reporting visits of 6–10 min and another 12% spending more than 16 min for a subsequent visit.

Comparison with other countries

Similarities between Swiss chiropractors and their international counterparts were found in the most common conditions treated (i.e. low back pain with or without leg pain followed by neck pain with or without arm pain), the common etiologies of these conditions, the most common age groups seen, and the most common treatment methods used (Diversified, Advice on activities of daily living, Trigger point therapy, Therapeutic exercises, Mobilization techniques, Applying physical therapy modalities, Drop technique).

Differences were found in the high proportion of patients referred directly to chiropractors from varying medical specialists in Switzerland, including paediatricians; that the most common category of patient to be seen by chiropractors in Switzerland is the acute, followed by the subacute patient; the much higher requirement for continuing education hours in Switzerland and the reduced use of diagnostic imaging compared to US practitioners.

Conclusions

The Swiss job analysis survey, with a 70% response rate, provides a useful overview of chiropractic practice in Switzerland. In general, Swiss chiropractors are predominately male, treat more female than male patients, see more patients in the 31–50 year age group, and most commonly treat low back/pelvic pain patients with or without leg pain followed by neck pain patients with or without arm pain. These findings are similar to reports from other countries and provide important information for guiding educational emphasis. Where

Swiss chiropractors differ in that they are more likely to treat acute patients compared to chronic patients, have at least 80 h per year of required CE credits, follow evidence-based guidelines for the use of diagnostic imaging, see over 7 new patients per week, treat over 100 patients per week, and have very high percentages of referrals from various medical specialists. The reasons behind the differences partly stem from the fact that chiropractic in Switzerland is considered one of the 5 medical professions, resulting in much better inter-professional relationships and referral patterns compared to other countries, reflecting chiropractic's status as integrated with medicine.⁵⁻⁹ The integration has most likely arisen due to legislation, insurance laws, a mandatory full-time 2 year post-graduate program required of all graduates, followed by a rigorous set of undergraduate and post-graduate examinations, the high number of mandatory CE credits required, the 4 month hospital rotation through orthopaedics and rheumatology and the requirement that all Swiss chiropractors must pass at least the first year of medicine to study abroad.

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