

SUBMISSION TO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

INQUIRY INTO ACCESS TO PRIMARY HEALTH-CARE SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

The CAA represents approximately 2600 chiropractors Australia-wide, with the ACT Branch (CAA ACT) comprising 32 members. Chiropractors are five-year university educated health professionals, with the ability to recognise pathological conditions that may require immediate referral to mainstream medical facilities. Chiropractors provide quality health-care services covering a range of neuro-musculoskeletal conditions specifically related to the spine, and are in regular contact with health professionals including general practitioners (GPs), and other allied health professionals. Chiropractic is the most utilised of the registered health professions which do not fall into the 'mainstream' of health-care provision.

The CAA ACT contends that chiropractors have the capacity to care for a wide range of patient health conditions and play a role in the ACT public health-care system. Over the last few years, the CAA ACT has presented submissions to:

- the ACT Minister for Health, recommending that chiropractic be included in ACT community health centres;
- the Chief Executive of ACT Health outlining details of a proposal for a pilot study into the viability of having chiropractors in ACT public health facilities;
- ACT Health recommending that chiropractors be designated health professionals to whom nurse-practitioners can refer in ACT Walk-in Centres (WiCs).

The CAA ACT offers this submission to show that through the following actions, chiropractors could contribute to the improvement of primary health care for the Canberra community:

- while GPs are the health professionals to consult for most medical conditions, doctors invariably spend time managing conditions which could be competently handled by chiropractors and other primary contact health practitioners;
- permitting ACT low-income earners to receive chiropractic treatment under the public health system would allow them access to appropriate health care and so reduce the development and ongoing costs of some chronic health issues;
- for certain conditions presenting at WiCs, chiropractors should be considered as a primary option for referral.

DISCUSSION

GP Shortage

The CAA ACT considers that chiropractors are suitably equipped to diagnose and manage a range of spine-related neuro-musculoskeletal conditions. We also contend that chiropractors possess the knowledge and clinical skills to determine when a referral to a medical practitioner is necessary, and in the best interests of the patient. Figures from the 2008 Bettering the Evaluation And Care of Health

(BEACH) study (General practice activity in Australia, 2007-2008) (see Additional Information, below), show that GPs are frequently asked to deal with conditions (such as back pain) with which chiropractors are competent to manage. International and Australian studies indicate that up to 95% of all people presenting to a chiropractor have a spine-related disorder of which 65-70% have low-back pain.

Given the number of people presenting at GPs' offices with back pain and headaches and that chiropractors are able and experienced in treating such conditions, it is reasonable to conclude that chiropractors could be better utilised and so ease the load on GPs.

Chiropractic care in publicly-funded health facilities

Disadvantaged people often do not have equality of access when it comes to various services, including health care. This situation is exacerbated in the ACT which has the lowest rates of bulk-billing for medical services. In addition, long waiting lists for public health services and no access to some allied health services through the public system, are further drawbacks. Extending the range of services offered by ACT Health would help to address this inequity, provide timely access and achieve better health outcomes, and thereby reduce the burden on private and government health services. This could have a significant impact on patients' health as well as on the cost of providing public health care in the ACT.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report *Australia's Health 2008* (see Additional Information), chiropractic is a widely-used health option among Australia's population. These statistics suggest that there is a high use of chiropractic services in the general community but these numbers are skewed towards those with financial means. Over 25% of patient encounters with general practitioners are with people who hold a Commonwealth concession card (BEACH Report 2008), but such patients only comprise 5.4% of patient encounters with chiropractors (private poll of Canberra chiropractors 2006). This shows that a high number of health cardholders use medical services and a disproportionately low number, chiropractic services.

In other words, if not for the economic barriers, it is possible that many disadvantaged people would avail themselves of chiropractic services. And if consumers do not have access to chiropractic, it may be that they are pursuing treatment which is less effective for their health conditions.

Chiropractic care in Walk-in Centres (WiCs)

The CAAACT strongly supports the WiCs which it considers have the potential to reduce pressure on the ACT's health system. The WiCs could provide an opportunity to spread the load and improve efficiency and equality of access to Canberra's health services. Nurse practitioners, with the skills to treat some conditions, and the capacity to refer to appropriate health practitioners, would ease the pressure on ACT hospital emergency departments as well as on general practice.

For certain conditions presenting at WiCs, chiropractors should be considered as primary options for referral. The ACT Health discussion paper regarding the feasibility of the establishment of WiCs in the ACT, anticipates that headaches and musculoskeletal problems are conditions that people using a Canberra WiC are likely to present with. As stated earlier, back pain, headaches, and neck/head pain, comprise 95 per cent of conditions that chiropractors treat. Chiropractors also provide practical advice to patients about back care, exercise, posture and lifestyle.

SUMMARY

The CAAACT recommends that the Inquiry consider the role that chiropractors could play in the public health system in the ACT, including in publicly-funded community health centres and the WiCs, and the possibilities that this could have for reducing workloads of other health professionals. It could also provide better access and therefore, better health-care, for all ACT residents, regardless of their financial means. The CAAACT welcomes further opportunities to discuss the implementation of the abovementioned initiatives.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Registered under laws in all Australian states and territories, chiropractors are health professionals, who, after completing an accredited five-year university program or similar study that satisfies the requirements of Australian chiropractic registration boards, provide health services to a wide range of Australians.

Chiropractors are trained to provide treatment and management for a range of spine-related neuro-musculoskeletal conditions, and operate on a fee-for-service basis. While chiropractic is not considered to be a 'mainstream' health-care option, many people consult chiropractors, not only for spine-related neuro-musculoskeletal conditions, but also for primary health care. Chiropractors are trained to recognise pathological conditions which may require immediate referral to mainstream medical facilities, and are in regular contact with health professionals including general practitioners and other allied health practitioners.

Various studies are available showing the benefits of chiropractic, including a February 2000 Macquarie University study (published in the *Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics*) which showed that people suffering with migraine headaches were helped with chiropractic care. The researchers concluded 'there have now been several studies demonstrating significant improvement in headaches or migraines after chiropractic'.

Chiropractic services are recognised by all private health insurers, private and government workers' compensation bodies, military compensation and veterans' affairs. Chiropractic services are available via general practitioner referral through Medicare's Enhanced Primary Care program.

Many studies have shown chiropractors to be appropriate health professionals to consult for musculoskeletal problems related to the spine. A July 2000 market research project in Queensland found chiropractors to be the therapists of choice for "back pain" (35%), "neck pain" (31%) and "slipped disc" (40%), compared to doctors (27%, 22% and 33% respectively) and physiotherapists (24%, 29% and 13% respectively).

Other figures of note are from the AIHW's ***Australia's Health 2008***:

- of those consulting health professionals other than doctors, nearly one-third (30%) consulted chemists and about one-fifth consulted chiropractors (21%) or physiotherapists/hydrotherapists (19%);
- the 2004–05 NHS Results suggest that in any two-week period, one in 28 Australians (0.7 million) consulted a complementary or alternative health professional: About one in every 47 Australians (0.4 million) consulted a chiropractor;
- 2000–01 Bettering the Evaluation And Care of Health (BEACH) study of general practice consultations. Of those who had used complementary/alternative therapies in the previous 12 months, 40% had seen a chiropractor, 32% a naturopath, 23% had had remedial massage and 20% had acupuncture;
- under the Medicare Allied Health Initiative, in 2006–07, about 38,000 chiropractic services were provided under these arrangements;
- private health ancillary insurance in the quarter ending June 2007, benefits were paid for about 1.95 million chiropractic services, (PHIAC 2007).

The 2008 BEACH study (General practice activity in Australia, 2007-2008) revealed the following:

- the classification of 'Musculoskeletal problems' (such as arthritis and back complaints) is in the five most common problems managed by GPs;
- the most common work-related problems managed by GPs were musculoskeletal (59.2%); the most common of these were back complaints (14.6% of work-related problems);
- 'back complaints' is the 9th most common problem managed with a clinical treatment and 7th most common Reason For Encounter with GPs. [Neck symptoms/complaint are classified separately and not as common. They number a further 1/10th to 1/5th to that of 'back complaints'.]