Low back pain: A call to action answered at NWHSU

Executive summary:
A call to action by one of the world’s leading medical journals is raising awareness and understanding about low back pain as a public health crisis. Northwestern Health Sciences University commends this initiative and commits to contributing to improved understanding and treatment through its recognized leadership role on low back pain issues. NWHSU offers knowledge and direct patient treatment through chiropractic, massage therapy, acupuncture and other disciplines that compose its curricular, research, clinical and professional support programs.

Full report:
Low back pain is the leading cause of disability in the United States and worldwide. Calling attention to this serious public health issue was the impetus for a series of three research-based articles published in The Lancet, one of the world’s most respected medical journals. The series concludes that reports of low back pain are growing in our country and around the world, driven in part by aging and lifestyle factors, and that health professionals are not doing enough to treat it—or are relying on ineffective and dangerous treatments that can make patients’ lives worse.

At Northwestern Health Sciences University (NWHSU), we commend The Lancet for its call to action on low back pain and for highlighting this specific public health crisis. Indeed, low back pain is so prevalent that there is not even a precise cost estimate of the macroeconomic impact it has worldwide.

What can health professionals, patients, public health experts, employers, educators and others do to address this issue? NWHSU believes, as do The Lancet experts, that answers will come from addressing low back pain as a public health issue, as stakeholders have done with issues such as obesity, smoking and diabetes. Answers will not come from one sector or discipline. Rather, they must come from the collective work and wisdom of all parties affected by the issue and empowered to effect change.

“The good news is we have identified low back pain as the health crisis that it is, and we have committed experts who know at least some of the solutions, as well as directions to go to find other answers,” said Dr. Chris Cassirer, President and CEO of NWHSU.

Cassirer added: “At NWHSU, low back pain has been a focus of our work since we began as Northwestern College of Chiropractic in 1941. We have always committed to a research-based approach to health issues. We also have committed to treating patients with an approach that starts with least-invasive treatments that demonstrate a track record of success. Chiropractic, therapeutic massage and acupuncture rank high on that list. They also are not costly, are able to be provided without significant or expensive equipment and have less serious adverse side effects than more invasive treatments.”

One of the key messages of The Lancet series is that, as reports of low back pain have grown worldwide, doctors and other health professionals have inadvertently been responding with treatments that, for many patients, are less effective, carry higher risks or both. Widely prescribing opioid medications, now
understood to be dangerous and highly addictive, or moving quickly to expensive, risky and less-effective surgical options, are two examples. Continuing on this treatment path not only will fail to effectively address low back pain but also will cause additional health problems, The Lancet concluded.

“Research evidence and best-practice guidelines recommend spinal manipulation, like that delivered by doctors of chiropractic, as well as acupuncture and therapeutic massage as first-line treatments for back pain. In fact, the American College of Physicians recommends these treatments before prescription medications,” said Dr. Michele Maiers, Executive Director of Research and Innovation at NWHSU and a member of the Board of Governors of the American Chiropractic Association.

Maiers added: “Treating low back pain is a significant part of the practice of chiropractic, massage therapy and acupuncture. As a community of skilled practitioners, we are committed to joining the effort to address this public health crisis. We are pleased to see an influential medical journal such as The Lancet sound the alarm on low back pain and call to attention an approach to care that does not over-medicalize back pain but instead prioritizes evidence-based care.”

NWHSU endorses several key steps for health providers and policy makers to take to effectively address the epidemic of low back pain in the U.S. and around the world:

- Increase messaging that changes the culture around back pain, empowering individuals to manage back complaints by staying active, exercising and remaining at work when possible.
- Design systems of care delivery and reimbursement to triage back pain patients toward clinical and cost-effective therapies supported by best-practice guidelines, including chiropractic, therapeutic massage and acupuncture.
- Identify and value the contributions that chiropractic, therapeutic massage, acupuncture and other treatments historically considered “non-traditional” or “alternative,” can provide to individual patients, their care plans and public health policies addressing low back pain.
- Work to integrate chiropractic, therapeutic massage, acupuncture and other treatments into care delivered by clinics, hospitals and other institutions, with a reliance on the least invasive and most effective care first.
- Expand access, especially among low- and middle-income individuals who represent the fastest growing segment of low back pain patients worldwide, to chiropractic, therapeutic massage, acupuncture and other forms of treatment that historically have not been available to many.
- Promote greater understanding of the causes, contributing factors and costs of low back pain by supporting research on the issue, particularly at colleges, universities and professional institutions in the U.S. and around the world.

A solution that touches on all of these steps is NWHSU’s WorkSiteRight program to provide access to chiropractic and other forms of care inside factories, warehouses and other workplaces where employees are at risk of injury, including low back pain. Research from employers who have opened WorkSiteRight clinics show that they are saving $8 for every $1 that they invest in care, largely through healthier workers, higher productivity and effective preventative care.

“We can make a difference in people’s lives and in public health based on what we already know and what further research can tell us,” said Dr. Trevor Foshang, Dean of the College of Chiropractic at NWHSU. “We can have a positive impact by expanding treatment and access with the tools of health that we know how to apply expertly. We also can deepen our understanding of low back pain and treatments by doing what scientists do—research, test findings and share knowledge.”
As disturbing as The Lancet findings about low back pain are, there is hope for people suffering from it and for communities and countries bearing its costs, NWHSU believes.

“Like other public health crises in history, the first step is identifying the issue and raising awareness,” Cassirer said. “The Lancet series has done this. Now it is up to health professionals and policy makers in the U.S. and around the world to respond. At NWHSU, we are committed to taking a leadership role in addressing low back pain and making lives better.”

About Northwestern Health Sciences University:
For more than 75 years, NWHSU, based in Bloomington, Minn., has provided world-class professional education and research as well as comprehensive health and wellness services. Our more than 130 faculty members annually teach 6,500 students pursuing degrees and continuing education in accredited programs in chiropractic, acupuncture, therapeutic massage, Chinese medicine, nutrition and other treatments. We have more than 7,500 graduates in the U.S. and 21 countries. More than 43,000 patient visits occur annually at our network of owned and operated clinics in four states.

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