

## Chiropractic's Strategic Inflection Point Facing the Reality of a Changing Health Care System

In his book, *Only the Paranoid Survive*, former Intel CEO Andy Grove put forward the argument that every business, organization, and individual will encounter “strategic inflection points” throughout their existence that can impact their direction and paths for the future.<sup>1</sup> These are the times in the life of an organization or an individual when a convergence of events takes place to change the basic fundamentals of day-to-day reality. A strategic inflection point occurs to every small business whenever a Wal-Mart moves into their community. A strategic inflection point occurred when sound was added to silent movies. We’ve seen a strategic inflection point occur when Apple introduced the iPod to the consumer market.

The decisions made during these times can mean an opportunity to rise to new heights, but it may mean a rapid descent in the other direction.

The chiropractic profession may be nearing its own strategic inflection point as our country’s health care delivery system continues to change. The direction of the profession for years in the future will depend upon the decisions that are made today. If no clear and consistent vision for the profession is defined, the marketplace will end up defining it for you--or leaving you out altogether.

I’ve had the opportunity to observe the chiropractic profession for 14 of the 28 years I have spent working in the health care industry. I have always been a huge believer in the place chiropractic could play in the health care system today, and the role it should play in the health care system of tomorrow. Over the years, chiropractic has made some significant strides to get where it is today. But, the basic fundamentals of health care that exist today are going to change. And, focusing on the way things “always have been” is a recipe for failure in the future.

There is still a tremendous role for chiropractic to play in the health care delivery model of tomorrow. But, the profession in general will need to change the way it thinks if it intends to take full advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead.

Make no mistake, today’s health care system is already changing and it’s changing fast. As costs continue to escalate, the entire industry is in a re-awakening in evaluating how it operates. The “network-based/benefit and reimbursement-driven” models of the past, are changing to one focused on technology, efficiency, transparency, prevention, and consumer involvement. It’s not there yet- but it’s only a matter of time. And, who knows what other ideas may be introduced as the 2008 elections begin to really roll.

As these events occur, chiropractors will need a clearer definition of who they are, what they do, and the value they bring to health care delivery. And, they will need to communicate this definition clearly, effectively, and collaboratively with the broader health care marketplace.

Unfortunately, chiropractic continues to have a significant “branding problem” with most of the broader health care market. Consumers, other health care professionals, and health care organizations still don’t understand “what a chiropractor does”. And what the marketplace doesn’t understand, it will define for you (both good and bad). The profession today needs to create a clearer understanding of chiropractic so this understanding can be communicated consistently to all health care stakeholders and the profession can be positioned where it wants to be, and should be positioned in the health care system of tomorrow.

Others have already argued that the failure of a common definition of chiropractic has “prevented the profession from establishing its cultural authority over any specific domain of health care.”<sup>2</sup> The 2005 study by the Institute of Alternative Futures stated “the effort of chiropractors to integrate with the medical community has been hampered by the lack of unity in the chiropractic field.”<sup>3</sup>

So, this isn’t a new concept. But, as the events of the new health care marketplace converge, and the profession approaches its own strategic inflection point, it’s one that, if left unattended today, may impact the profession for years to come.

The health care system that has been in place is unsustainable and will be changing whether we like it or not. Others have acknowledged that the broader chiropractic institutions and individual chiropractors are “more focused on preserving the status quo (e.g. practice rights, reimbursement, and wallowing in our unsolvable internal philosophical and professional identity debates),”<sup>4</sup> than addressing the changes and market realities that are just over the horizon.

There will be difficult decisions ahead, and focusing on the status quo is really not an option- because the status quo will no longer exist.

All health care professionals will encounter more substantial changes in the years ahead. Individual consumers will be paying more of the bills with higher co-pays and deductibles creating a cash practice where one didn't exist before. Reimbursement will be linked to value and providers of care will be required to demonstrate their value in many different ways. Participating in a network may not be as important as it was in the past. Interest in health, wellness, and prevention will continue to become a more important part of the health care equation. The practice models used today may be unsustainable in the system of tomorrow. These are all market realities the chiropractic profession will need to address as it establishes its vision for the future.

In their book, *Confronting Reality*, business consultants Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan state the need for everyone to “fully understand the realities of the world in which they do business, and they need a new way to mesh their business goals and actions with those realities”.<sup>5</sup>

The reality is that health care is a business. It is the largest economic segment of the largest economy in the world. The reality is that this huge market is going through a radical adjustment which may create a series of marketplace events and create a strategic inflection point for the chiropractic profession in the very near future. The profession will need to look at things from a different perspective with much more unity than exists today to create a common understanding of chiropractic to communicate to consumers, health plans, government entities, and all stakeholders. It will require consistency and discipline in executing initiatives to support this common understanding to take advantage of the opportunities that are unfolding.

Noted business guru Warren Bennis has said leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality. The leadership in chiropractic will need to create a common vision to reflect the changing market dynamics the profession will be facing in the very near future. And, it will need to make the decisions going forward to translate the vision into reality.

Others have already advocated for the need for unity and leadership in defining who you are, what you do, and your role in participating in the system of tomorrow. But now it will take action to make your opinions become a belief and for your beliefs a reality. A strategic inflection point may be lurking on the horizon- and it may not be far away.

## **References:**

<sup>1</sup> Grove, Andrew S. *Only The Paranoid Survive*. Doubleday, 1996

<sup>2</sup> Nelson CF, Lawrence DJ, Triano JJ, Bronfort G, Perle SM, Metz RD, Hegetschweiler K, LaBrot T. Chiropractic as spine care: a model for the profession; *Chiropractic & Osteopathy*; 2005; 13:9

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Alternative Futures: *The Future of Chiropractic Revisited: 2005-2015*

<sup>4</sup> Mootz, RD. *Chiropractics Current State: Impacts For The Future*; JMPT, January, 2007. National University of Health Sciences

<sup>5</sup> Bossidy, Larry and Ram Charan. 2004. *Confronting Reality, Doing What Matters to Get Things Right*. Crown Business

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