

# Stoicism and the philosophy of Chiropractic: Recovering professional identity through an ancient way of life

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**Objective:** To explore how Stoic philosophy can provide insight and practical guidance for a Chiropractic profession experiencing criticism and appearing to be losing identity by examining parallels between Stoic principles and classic Chiropractic philosophy. I propose a Stoic-Chiropractic way of life for contemporary practitioners.

**Discussion:** Sociological analysis over the last two decades describe Chiropractic as a profession 'at the crossroads' between mainstream and alternative medicine, struggling with internal and external criticism. (1-3) Surveys of Chiropractic students show simultaneous endorsements of traditional vertebral subluxation concepts and evidence-based practice, suggesting cognitive dissonance and identity tension. (4-6) Against this backdrop, Stoicism, an ancient Greco-Roman philosophy of virtue, rationality, and resilience, offers a well-developed framework for living with clarity under pressure. (7-9) Core Stoic distinctions between what is and is not under our control, the cultivation of character, and living 'according to nature' can be meaningfully compared as articulated by DD Palmer, BJ Palmer, Stephenson and later technique developers. (16-21)

This paper first outlines key Stoics ideas about Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, (10-12) then summarises classic Chiropractic philosophy and current debates about identity. It then analyses convergences and tensions between Stoic and Chiropractic thought and proposes how Stoic practices such as daily reflection, value-driven action, and disciplined acceptance of criticism could help chiropractors regain philosophical clarity. They could also communicate their message more effectively, and add value in a contemporary patient-oriented health system.

**Conclusion:** A Stoic reading of Chiropractic suggests that the profession's core contribution lies in defending contested metaphysical claims and more in embodying virtues, prudence, justice, courage, and temperance; in the specific domain of spine and nervous-system care. Integrating Stoic way-of-life practices with a principled but critically reflective Chiropractic philosophy may help practitioners navigate criticism, reduce internal conflict, and re-articulate a coherent identity that is both faithful to Chiropractic's roots and intelligible to modern stakeholders.

**Indexing terms:** Chiropractic; Stoicism; Professional Identity; Philosophy, Vertebral subluxation; Gonstead; Resilience; Ethics.

## Introduction

The Chiropractic profession has long been described as occupying a liminal position between mainstream and alternative medicine, combining the institutional markers of a health profession with an often contested philosophical heritage. (1,2) In their influential paper, Meeker and Haldeman argue that Chiropractic had achieved licensure, accreditation and primary contact status in many jurisdictions, yet remained 'trapped' in an unsatisfactory marginal position, with unresolved questions of professional

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and social identity. (1) More recently, Leboeuf-Yde and colleagues characterised Chiropractic as '*one big unhappy family*', divided between an '*evidence-friendly*' musculoskeletal faction and a '*traditional*' vitalistic group oriented to vertebral subluxation as the centre of health. (3)



Critical discourse analysis of Chiropractic texts echoes this picture of internal contestation. Villanueva-Russell identified heterogeneous and conflicting discourses about identity and cultural authority, particularly around the role of science and evidence, and around whether Chiropractic should remain a marginal, philosophical distinct profession or reposition itself as a limited spine-care speciality within biomedicine. (2)

Survey work among Chiropractic students in North America, Australia, and New Zealand further suggests that future practitioners simultaneously endorse traditional ideas and an aspiration to evidence-based, mainstream participation. (4, 5) Gliedt et al. found that most students felt Chiropractic should be part of mainstream health care and valued education in evidence-based practice, while also preferring a continued emphasis on vertebral subluxation. (4) De Luca et al. reported similar patterns in Australasian cohorts, with institutional context strongly shaping whether students leaned toward traditional or progressive identity positions. (5) McGregor and colleagues demonstrated that practicing Chiropractors can be clustered into factions with markedly different paradigms of care, ranging from vitalistic, subluxation-centred to more biomedical, pain-focused orientations. (6)

Against this backdrop of criticism, identity conflict and cognitive dissonance, it is understandable that many Chiropractors feel that the profession is 'losing its soul' or drifting without a clear compass. This paper suggests that ancient Stoicism, developed by philosophers such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, may offer a surprisingly relevant framework for re-examining Chiropractic philosophy, recovering a coherent professional identity, and grounding day-to-day practice in resilient, value-driven living. Rather than in defensive ideology.

The aims of this paper are to:

- ▶ Outline core Stoic philosophical principles, with attention to their practical, way-of-life orientation, (7-12)
- ▶ Summarise key elements of classic Chiropractic philosophy as articulated by DD Palmer, BJ Palmer, Stephenson, Gonstead and later authors, (16-21)
- ▶ Explore conceptual parallels and differences between Stoic and Chiropractic worldviews, and to
- ▶ Analyse how Stoic way of life might be integrated with a contemporary Chiropractic way of life to clarify professional identity and add value in modern health care.

### **Stoicism as a philosophy of practice**

Stoicism arose in the Hellenistic period and matured under Roman thinkers such as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. (7, 8) It is best understood not as abstract speculation but as a disciplined way of living aimed at eudaemonia, flourishing through virtue, under conditions of uncertainty and constraint. (9. Three themes are particularly relevant to Chiropractic.

### *The dichotomy of control*

Epictetus famously distinguished between what is 'up to us' (our judgements, intentions, and actions) and what is not (our body, reputation, wealth and external events). (10) The Stoic practitioner trains attention on the former and accepts the latter with equanimity. This 'dichotomy of control' is not fatalism but a strategy of radical responsibility: excellence is sought where agency is greatest, and frustration is reduced by relinquishing unrealistic expectations of mastery over outcomes.

In health care, this mindset parallels on process rather than guaranteed cure: the clinician can control their honesty, diligence, craftsmanship and communication, but not the patient's biology, behaviour or the wider political economy of health. Modern cognitive-behavioural therapy has explicitly drawn on Epictetus's insight that 'people are disturbed not by things, but by their views about things' to structure cognitive reframing and behaviour change (13).

### *Living according to nature and logos*

Stoics held that the cosmos is ordered by logos, a rational principle or 'fire' that structures all events. (7, 8) To 'live according to nature' meant aligning one's reasoning and actions with this rational order rather than with irrational passions.

For humans, endowed with rationality and sociality, this implied both personal integrity and concern for the common good.

Marcus Aurelius's Meditations repeatedly returns to two practical consequences: first, that one's own mind is the only true domain of freedom, and second, that any role: emperor, parent, artisan or physician, is to be performed as a function lovingly and conscientiously executed within a larger whole. (12)

### *Virtue, role-duty and spiritual exercises*

Stoic ethics centred on four cardinal virtues: wisdom (phronesis), justice, courage, and temperance. (7, 9) These are cultivated through daily 'spiritual exercises':

- ▶ meditative reflection,
- ▶ journaling,
- ▶ pre-meditation of potential difficulties,
- ▶ review of one's actions,
- ▶ voluntary simplicity, and
- ▶ conscious rehearsal of appropriate response to adversity. (9, 14, 15)

Seneca writes of adversity as training ‘a gymnasium for the soul’ arguing that fate ‘chooses brave men and women for the tests’. (11) Epictetus instructed his students to view each social role (teacher, citizen, parent) as a mask assigned by the playwright of the universe: the task is not to pick the script but to play one’s part well. (10)

Contemporary interpreters emphasise that Stoicism is inherently practical: it is a ‘philosophy of life’ rather than a purely theoretical enterprise. (7, 14, 15) The practitioner repeatedly asks: given my role and circumstances what would a wise, just, courage and temperate person do now?

## Classic Chiropractic philosophy and professional identity

Chiropractic’s founding texts also present a philosophy of life, not merely a set of manual procedures. However, their metaphysical language, particularly around ‘innate intelligence’ and vertebral subluxation, has become a major site of controversy in contemporary debates. (2, 3, 19, 24)

### *DD Palmer and the metaphysical origin story*

DD Palmer’s *The Chiropractor’s Adjuster* frames Chiropractic as the art, science, and philosophy of locating and correcting vertebral subluxations to restore the flow of innate intelligence from brain to body. (16) Palmer proposed that 95% of disease was caused by spinal subluxations and the remaining 5% by other articular misalignments, casting the Chiropractor as a guardian of nervous-system integrity and, by extension, of general health.

Palmer’s language is steeped in late 19<sup>th</sup> century vitalism and spiritualism. Nonetheless, several conceptual themes are salient for our comparison:

- ▶ The universe is ordered by a ‘Universal Intelligence’ that expresses itself through ‘innate intelligence’ in living organisms,
- ▶ Health is the unobstructed expression of this innate organising principle; disease arises from interference (often mechanical) with its transmission, and
- ▶ The Chiropractor’s role is specific, principled adjustment-not general manipulation or symptomatic treatment.

### *BJ Palmer, ‘The Big Idea’ and the Chiropractic way of life*

BJ Palmer elaborated and popularised his father’s idea, emphasising Chiropractic as both clinical practice and way of life. In *The Bigness of the Fellow Within*, he stressed that ‘*the power that made the body heals the body*’ and portrayed vertebral adjustment as a means of allowing this inner power to operate more freely. (17)

BJ simultaneously developed a strong professional identity narrative: Chiropractors as distinct, principled non-therapeutical adjusters, frequently in tension with medicine and with ‘mixers’

inside their ranks. He emphasised discipline, personal development and unwavering adherence to chiropractic principles, frequently in quasi-missionary language.

### *Stephenson's 33 principles and systematisation*

Stephenson's Chiropractic Textbook systematised Chiropractic philosophy into 33 principles, beginning with the 'Major Premise' that a Universal Intelligence is in all matter, continually giving it its properties and actions. (18) Subsequent principles describe the relationship between universal and innate intelligence, the role of the nervous system, and the concept of vertebral subluxation as interference with the transmission of innate forces.

Whatever one's contemporary view of their scientific plausibility, Stephenson's principles provided a coherent internal logic and an explicitly philosophical foundation that bound early Chiropractic together. (18, 19)

### *Technique systems and the Gonstead tradition*

As Chiropractic matured, technique systems emerged that sought to operationalise philosophy into specific biomechanical procedures. Clarence Gonstead is emblematic of this movement. His approach emphasised precise analysis of spinal biomechanics, instrumentation, full-spine radiography, and specific adjustments delivered with the credo '*Find the subluxation, accept it where you find it, fix it, and leave it alone*'. (20, 21)

Textbook treatments of technique systems, including Gonstead, often highlight a shared commitment to specificity, repeatable analysis, and a disciplined clinical process, even where philosophical language differs. (20, 21)

### *Contemporary attempts to redefine identity*

In response to scientific critique of vertebral subluxation and to changing health-care expectations, several authors have proposed contemporary models of Chiropractic identity centred on spine-care rather than broad vitalistic claims. Nelson et al. suggested that Chiropractic be conceptualised as spine care within a biopsychosocial framework, with clear clinical competencies and delimitations of scope. (22) Schneider et al. later developed this into a 'spine care identity' that remains compatible with a diversity of practice styles while anchoring the profession in an area of high public need and growing evidence. (23)

By contrast, Hart and others have argued that analysis and adjustment of vertebral subluxation should remain the profession's distinctive defining feature, and that abandoning this focus risks eroding chiropractic's unique contribution. (24)

Taken together, these developments reveal a profession wrestling with its inheritance: a richly developed but contested metaphysical system, a legacy of strong identity narratives, and contemporary pressures for scientific plausibility, interprofessional compatibility and clear public value. (1 - 3, 19, 22 - 24)

## Conceptual parallels between Stoicism and Chiropractic philosophy

Despite their very different historical and intellectual contexts, Stoicism and classic Chiropractic share several structural features that make comparison fruitful. This section does not claim that Chiropractic is 'Stoic' in origin, but that Stoic concepts can illuminate enduring tensions within Chiropractic thought.

### *Order, intelligence and living according to nature*

Stoicism's logos and Chiropractic's Universal/Innate Intelligence both express an intuition that reality is ordered and intelligible. (7, 8, 16, 18) For the Stoic, nature is rational and purposive, and the wise person seeks to understand and align with it. (7, 12) For the early Chiropractor, health arises when innate intelligence can be expressed without interference, and the Chiropractor's task is to remove mechanical impediments to this expression. (16, 18)

Critically, however, Stoic appeals to nature are primarily ethical and epistemic, not physiological in a modern sense. Logos is not a measurable force conveyed by specific tissues, rather, it is the rational structure of reality and of human reason. (7, 8) Chiropractic's historic language of 'forces' and 'transmission' invites empirical scrutiny and has, in numerous instances, not been borne out by modern neurophysiology. (19, 22)

A Stoic-informed Chiropractic philosophy might therefore re-interpret 'living according to nature' less as a metaphysical assertion about an invisible substance, and more as a commitment to practice harmonising with human biology as understood by contemporary science, while integrating ethical virtues and patient-centred values.

### *Role, duty, and professional calling*

Both traditions place strong emphasis on role-duty. For Marcus Aurelius, the task is not to choose one's historical circumstances but to perform one's assigned social role: emperor, citizen, parent, with excellence and without complaint. (12) Epictetus reminds his students that if they decide to be philosophers, they must accept the hardships, misunderstandings, and sacrifices that accompany that role. (10)

Similarly, DD and BJ Palmer framed Chiropractic as a calling that required courage, steadfastness in the face of legal persecution, and unwavering dedication to a distinctive method. (16, 17) Early Chiropractors understood themselves as 'separate and distinctive' and often accepted marginalisation as the cost of fidelity to principle. (16-18)

A Stoic reading, however, would insist that role-duty be constantly evaluated against the higher standard of virtue and the common good. If clinging to a particular metaphors or identity markers demonstrably harms patients, undermines public trust, or fosters internal dishonesty,

the Stoic practitioner is obliged to revise how the role is understood, even if this means relinquishing comforting narratives. (7, 9, 13)

### *The dichotomy of control and Chiropractic under criticism*

Stoicism offers a direct lens on the current wave of criticism and regulatory pressure directed at Chiropractic. (2, 3, 19, 22-24) Much of the profession's distress arises from factors beyond the individual practitioner's control: media portrayals, historical controversies, decisions of professional bodies and the actions of colleagues with whom they may disagree.

The dichotomy of control would direct chiropractors to focus on:

- ▶ What is under control:
  - The clinical quality of each adjustment.
  - The honesty, proportionality and evidence-basis of their claims.
  - Their willingness to engage respectfully in intra, and interprofessional dialogue.
  - Their commitment to continual learning and self-scrutiny.
  
- ▶ What is not fully under their control:
  - The actions of other chiropractors.
  - Media narratives and social media attacks.
  - Policy decisions by insurers, regulators, or governments.

Rather than react with defensiveness or fatalism, a Stoic Chiropractor would rather treat criticism as material for self-examination: is there some truth here? Where can I improve? If attacks are clearly unjust, the response is still guided by reason and virtue, not by outrage or fear. (10-12, 14)

### *Virtue, subluxation, and the temptation of dogma*

Stoicism is acutely aware of the human tendency to cling to identity-defining beliefs even when evidence of rational argument suggest revision, (7, 13) For the Stoic, dogmatism is a failure of wisdom and humility.

In Chiropractic, vertebral subluxation has functioned as both a clinical construct and an identity symbol. (19, 24) Hart, for example, argues that analysis and adjustment of subluxation define Chiropractic's distinctiveness. (24) Leboeuf-Yde et al. note that traditional, subluxation-centred factions are in open tension with evidence-focused groups, and question whether such deep philosophical differences are reconcilable within a single profession. (3)

A Stoic approach does not dictate a particular clinical stance on subluxation, but it does demand intellectual honesty:

- ▶ If subluxation is retained, it should be as a carefully defined, testable concept consistent with contemporary neurobiology and clinical evidence, (19, 22-24)
- ▶ If empirical support for strong causal claims is lacking, the virtuous response is to moderate language, acknowledge uncertainty, and avoid over-promising outcomes, and
- ▶ Either way, clinging to subluxation primarily as a badge of tribal belonging fails the Stoic test of aligning belief with reason and evidence. (7, 9, 13)

### Merging a Stoic way of life with a Chiropractic way of life

Integrating Stoicism with Chiropractic need not mean importing ancient cosmology into modern practice. Rather, the proposal is to infuse Chiropractic's existing emphasis on a distinctive way of life with a Stoic tools for resilience, ethical clarity and communication.

#### *Personal practice: from technician to moral agent*

Chiropractic education and technique system rightly emphasise psychomotor skill, biomechanics and clinical reasoning. (19-21) Stoicism adds a complementary dimension: the chiropractor as moral agent whose character shapes every encounter.

Practical Stoic exercises that can be adapted for chiropractors include: (9, 13-15)

- ▶ Morning intention-setting: Briefly reviewing the day's schedule and pre-meditating likely challenges: a sceptical patient, a complex case, a confrontational colleague. The practitioner rehearses responding with patience, clarity, and professionalism.
- ▶ Evening reflections: Writing a short journal note on three questions:
  1. What did I do well today in line with my values as a Chiropractor?
  2. Where did I fall short (e.g. rushed, over-stated, reacted defensively)?
  3. What can I do differently tomorrow?
- ▶ Voluntary simplicity: Periodically choosing to practise contentment with fewer external rewards, seeing criticism, financial stress or uncertainty as training in prioritising intrinsic over extrinsic goods.

Such exercises shift identity from 'someone who performs a technique' to 'someone who strives to embody wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance in the specific role of Chiropractic practitioner'.

#### *Clinical communication: conveying the Chiropractic message clearly*

One of the profession's vulnerabilities is communication that oscillates between over-claiming and apologetic vagueness. Stoicism encourages speech that is truthful, proportionate, and oriented to the interlocutor's rational capacity. (7, 10-12)

Applied to patient communication, this suggests:

- ▶ Explaining spinal and nervous-system concepts in biologically plausible, jargon-free language, avoiding deterministic promises
- ▶ Framing the adjustment not as a magical intervention but as a once tool among others (movement, load management, sleep, stress reduction) just to name a few, to help the body adapt and function more effectively
- ▶ Acknowledge uncertainty: *'Based on the best evidence and my experience, this is how I think I can help; here are the limits of what I know'.*

Such honesty may initially seem less persuasive than dramatic claims; however, it builds long-term trust, which Stoics and contemporary ethicists alike regards as central to professional integrity (2, 7, 9, 22, 23).

### *Professional culture: from factionalism to value-based pluralism*

Stoicism does not erase genuine philosophical differences within a profession, but it offers a vocabulary for conducting disagreements virtuously. Instead of framing debates as battles for dominance, a Stoic-informed chiropractic culture would ask:

- ▶ What set of beliefs and practices best serves patient's long-term interests and the common good?
- ▶ How can chiropractors who differ on metaphysical or scope-of-practice questions still collaborate on shared commitments to honesty, clinical competence and respect for evidence?

This does not imply 'anything goes'. On the contrary, Stoic ethics may sharpen rather than blur boundary lines, especially where certain practices demonstrably harm patients or undermine public trust. But the tone and method of boundary-setting would be guided by reasoned argument and transparent criteria, not by caricature or personal attack (2, 3, 6).

### **Clarifying value and identity in contemporary health care**

Stoic philosophy can help Chiropractors shift from a defensive posture, 'protecting Chiropractic from critics', to a proactive articulation of what the profession can uniquely contribute in today's health systems (1-3, 22, 23).

Several candidate-identity anchors emerge from the integration proposed here:

1. Guardians of spine and movement health with a nervous-system focus: Building on Nelson's and Schneider's models, (22, 23) Chiropractors can present themselves as primary-contact practitioners specialising in conservative, hands-on management of

spine-related and neuro-musculoskeletal problems, guided by evidence where it exists and by transparent reasoning where it does not.

2. Clinicians who integrate technical excellence with character excellence: A Stoic-Chiropractic way of life highlights the virtues of attentiveness, patience, courage in discussing uncertainty, and justice in avoiding over-servicing or under-referral. This can distinguish Chiropractors in systems that increasingly value relational continuity and trust.
3. Educators of embodied self-care. Many Chiropractic practices already incorporate lifestyle advice around posture, movement, stress, and nutrition. A Stoic framework can deepen this by explicitly coaching patients in distinguishing controllable and uncontrollable factors, focusing on purposeful actions rather than catastrophising, and adopting realistic, value-consistent health goals. (13-15, 22, 23)
4. Participants in a broader evidence-informed, virtue-based spine-care community. Rather than defining identity in opposition to medicine or physiotherapy, Chiropractors can align with other professions around shared commitments to patient-centred, evidence-informed care while still maintaining specific techniques and traditions where these are shown to be safe and effective (1-3, 22, 23).

Within such an identity, classic Chiropractic philosophy is neither uncritically preserved nor simply discarded instead, it is sifted through Stoic criteria: what elements foster virtue, rationality and the common good, and what elements hinder these aims?

### Limitations and future directions

This paper is a conceptual exploration rather than an empirical study. It selectively engages classic Stoic texts and Chiropractic sources to draw parallels that may be contested by specialists in either field. (7-12, 16-21) The discussion necessarily simplifies complex historical traditions and cannot substitute for detailed philological or historiographical work.

Furthermore, Stoicism is one among many possible philosophical framework that could inform professional identity. Existential, phenomenological, Buddhist or Indigenous perspectives may offer different and equally valuable insights. The choice of Stoicism here rests on its explicit focus on role-duty, resilience, rationality and ethical cultivation under criticism, features highly pertinent to Chiropractic's current situation. (1-3, 7-15, 22-24)

#### *Future research includes:*

- Qualitative studies of chiropractors who explicitly engage with Stoic practices and their impact on burnout, resilience and ethical decision-making.
- Educational interventions introducing Stoic concepts into chiropractic curricula and examining effects on students handling of identity tensions (4-6).

- Philosophical work critically comparing Stoic concepts of nature and reason with contemporary biological and neurophysiological models relevant to spinal care (19, 22, 23).

## Conclusion

Chiropractic today faces a real and perceived crisis of identity, legitimacy, and cohesion. Sociological and professional analysis describe a profession pulled between traditional vitalistic narratives and pressures for evidence-aligned, spine-care integration. (1-3, 6, 22-24) Merely asserting or abandoning inherited doctrines has not resolved this tension.

Stoicism does not offer a ready-made solution, but it does provide a robust, time-tested framework for living and practising under precisely such conditions of external criticism and internal conflict. By re-centring attention on what is genuinely under the Chiropractor's control: clinical excellence, honesty, reason-giving, and the cultivation of virtuous character; Stoicism can help disentangle enduring values from contingent identity markers.

Re-reading Chiropractic's classic text through a Stoic lens suggests that the profession's deepest strength is not any single metaphysical claim. But, it is its aspiration to serve human flourishing by caring for the spine and nervous system in a principled, hands-on, person-centred way. (16-18, 20-24) Integrating Stoic way-of-life practices with a critically refined Chiropractic philosophy may therefore aid in recovering a coherent identity: one that honours the profession's founders, responds intelligently to contemporary evidence, and functions with courage and humility amidst ongoing change.

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*Also by this author*

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