



8 February 2019

**Subject:** Need for appropriate triage and referral to specialists for the management of neuromusculoskeletal conditions

**Formal Request:**

The New Brunswick Chiropractors Association (NBCA), on behalf of its members, is requesting the implementation of measures to allow for chiropractors to refer directly to specialists, as needed.

**Issue:**

Neuromusculoskeletal conditions, such as back and neck pain, are among the most prevalent and costliest conditions in New Brunswick, and one of the primary reasons for physician and emergency room visits. In addition, neuromusculoskeletal conditions are key contributors to wait times. However, evidence from Ontario does suggest that 9 out of 10 referrals to orthopedic and neuro-surgeons are inappropriate referrals. In fact, these patients wait on average over a year to be simply referred to their physicians without recourse or access to evidence-based conservative care options, like chiropractic, physiotherapy or even self-management.

**Opportunities:**

The same situation is also present here in NB, and more can be done to improve the triage and referral mechanisms for patients suffering from neuromusculoskeletal conditions. In fact, compounded by a quickly aging population, it is expected that wait times will only continue to rise and outcomes diminish unless the system implements evidence-based approaches and models. Notably, other provinces, such as Ontario, have implemented innovative triage models of care to help reduce wait times and improve referral mechanisms.

We know that low back pain, for example, is one of the primary reasons for visiting the emergency room and family doctors; however, too often, these patients are provided either provided pain medication or referred to diagnostic imaging or specialist referral. Evidence suggests that direct access to chiropractors can help reduce inappropriate referrals by providing direct access to conservative pain management option.

Yet, chiropractors are extensively trained to assess, diagnose and manage neuromusculoskeletal conditions. Innovative models of care demonstrate that allowing chiropractors and others with the right skills and knowledge to triage and refer to specialists or conservative care, can help decrease wait times and improve access to the right care for patients. The Inter-professional Spine Assessment and Education Clinics (ISAEC) model in Ontario has consistently provided access to triage within 12 days, and a rate of referrals for imaging or specialist consultation of approximately just 7-8%<sup>i</sup> of the original referrals. A 12 day “wait time” is a stark contrast to wait times extending over a year for a surgical referral for example. This is an innovative, cost-effective and evidence-based solution that could be implemented in New Brunswick. The reduction in wait times for patients can be significant on their prognosis and ultimately their recovery and return to work and activities of daily living.

**Conclusion:**

The New Brunswick Chiropractors Association (NBCA), on behalf of its members, is requesting the implementation of measures to **allow for chiropractors to refer directly to specialists**, as needed. As primary care and primary contact providers, chiropractors are experts in the assessment, diagnosis and management of neuro-musculoskeletal conditions. Chiropractors have the skills and knowledge to manage patients conservatively, and to refer to specialists when needed. Evidence strongly recommends a trial of conservative care, unless red flags are present, prior to referring for a surgical consultation. By allowing chiropractors to refer directly, it is expected

that chiropractors perform a thorough assessment and examination, determine a diagnosis and develop a plan of care with the patient, which in under 10% of the population may include a referral. However, for the remaining 90%, evidence does support conservative care, including chiropractic, as first-line to improve pain and function.

It is recommended that the Government of New Brunswick maximize existing health human resources, and truly optimize the skills and knowledge of chiropractors. Part of the solution is ensuring effective triage and referrals for specialty services.

**Contact information:**

For additional information, please contact the NBCA at (506) 455-6800 or by email at [fleblanc@nbchiropratic.ca](mailto:fleblanc@nbchiropratic.ca).

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<sup>i</sup> Retrieved from [www.isaec.org](http://www.isaec.org).