Migraineurs' Perceptions of Chiropractic Care:
A Qualitative Sub-study of a Randomized Controlled Trial

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BACKGROUND

- Migraine is a leading cause of disability worldwide.
- People with migraine often seek complementary and integrative health approaches, such as chiropractic care.
- Due to the interplay between migraine and neck pain and muscular tension, chiropractic care may be a promising non-pharmacological treatment option for migraineurs.
- Little is known about perceptions of chiropractic care for migraine.

OBJECTIVE

To characterize expectations, attitudes, and experiences of women with migraine receiving chiropractic care within a randomized trial.

METHODS

The IMPACT study: A randomized clinical trial (RCT)
Design: 2-arm pilot RCT
Subjects: 61 women aged 20-55 w/ 4-13 migraines/month
Intervention: 14 weeks multimodal chiropractic care (10 Tx) + enhanced usual care (UC) vs. UC alone
Qualitative Interviews: 15 individuals were randomized to receive chiropractic care and participate in two semi-structured qualitative interviews
1. Baseline interview: reasons for joining study, migraine history, treatments tried, experiences with and expectations for chiropractic care
2. 14-week follow-up interview: characteristics of chiropractic care, therapeutic relationship with chiropractor, beliefs about treatment efficacy
Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by Scribie Audio/Video Transcription (San Francisco, CA).

Qualitative analysis
- Two independent reviewers used a constant comparative method of analysis for generating grounded theory:
  - Separately searched for meaningful categories and potential patterns across all interviews
  - Compared categories searching for emergent themes and came to consensus on themes at team meeting
  - Found exemplar quotes across participants to illustrate themes

RESULTS

Demographics
34.9 ± 8.9 years old, 93.3% white, 73.3% non-Hispanic, and an average of 7.7 ± 2.5 migraines per month at baseline.

Themes:
There were 3 emergent themes, outlined below:

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<thead>
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<th>Theme 1: Musculoskeletal issues contribute to migraine</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Heightened awareness of relationship between musculoskeletal issues and migraine</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Chiropractic care as a way to manage stress, tension, posture and migraine</td>
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Baseline
- “I've been really stressed at work...That's definitely been triggering migraines. My shoulders and neck have been super tight lately...I think that [tightness] triggers my migraines, especially the pain at the base of my neck. ... [The headache pain sits] down in my neck.”

After chiropractic
- “[Chiropractic care] relieved this pressure in my neck. I have learned more about my body positioning because [I realize] this part of my neck has been a trigger.”

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<th>Theme 2: Revising their conceptions about chiropractic</th>
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<td>• Initial skepticism and uncertainty about chiropractic in general and how chiropractic could treat migraines, but interest in trying a new treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Broadened understanding of chiropractic as a multimodal therapy for improving strength, flexibility, posture and self-care</td>
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Baseline
- “The chiropractic part to me sounds really interesting because I really feel like there’s some relationship between my neck and my headache.”
- “All I know is that they crack your back.”

After chiropractic
- “I was surprised how much muscular work was done...I definitely appreciated that part, because I feel like that’s where most of my problems are. In muscular stuff, and not necessarily structural issue”
- “Even though I'm still getting some headaches, I feel like I know what I need to do or like things that I wanna keep up so that I can strengthen some of the muscles in my neck and make sure that whatever it may be, it will help my headaches.”

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<th>Theme 3: The chiropractor-patient relationship</th>
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<td>• Valued a trusting and reciprocal relationship with a provider</td>
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<td>• Importance of provider validating pain and giving them tools to manage migraine</td>
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After chiropractic
- “I trusted [the chiropractor] would understand, and he would always shift [his approach] based on whatever I was saying.”
- “He was very attentive to my personal needs and giving me specific exercises for my migraines. I learned how certain muscles were connected and certain joints were connected, and how they might contribute to migraines and pain. He showed me the skeleton and how things were connected, so that helped me understand certain symptoms that I was having”

CONCLUSIONS

Study participants reported:
1. Increased awareness of the interplay between musculoskeletal stress and tension, posture and migraine;
2. Shifted understanding of chiropractic from limited/skeptical to a multimodal, individualized way of caring for their body;
3. A trusting, collaborative relationship with the chiropractor that increased self-awareness and self-efficacy.

Further research on perceptions and efficacy of chiropractic care for migraine is warranted.

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