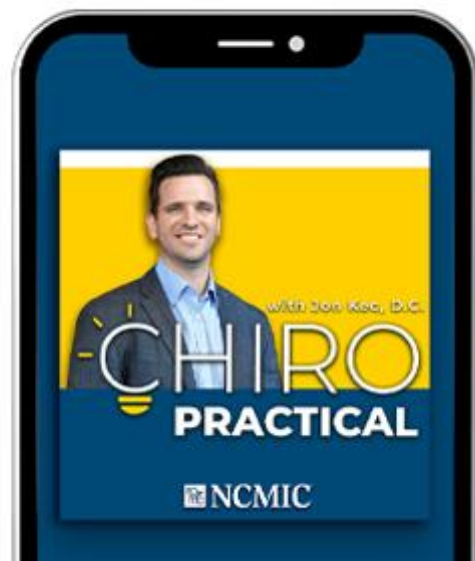




Jon Kec

This is Chiropractical and I'm your host, Jon Kec. Chances are, if you've served or know anyone that has, you've seen it, you felt it. Low back pain, neck pain, the wear and tear that comes from the hectic action of military life. Since 1999, the Department of Veterans Affairs is woven chiropractic care into their system, and since 2004, it's been a standard VA benefit.

Today veterans can see chiropractors onsite at VA facilities or through their Community Cares program. The program has grown fast now reaching over a hundred sites with over 500 VA chiropractors who serve thousands of veterans every year with research showing each full-time DC helping hundreds of unique patients annually.

In short, chiropractic isn't an add-on at the VA. It's part of the toolbox to keep veterans moving, working, and living with less pain. Today we're going to unpack how it works, who qualifies for care and what to expect from the future of chiropractic inside the VA.

Welcome to Chiropractical. I'm your host Jon Kec, and today we're diving into a conversation I've been hoping to have for a long time.

The role that the chiropractic care can play in the VA systems. When you walk into a VA hospital, you just kind of feel it. There's this quiet strength and a sense of purpose. You can't quite put your finger on. Every patient in the building has a story and every clinician has their calling. It's somehow a mix of service and healing, and in there...is Chiropractic, but it wasn't always that way. As we'll discuss. Years ago, chiropractic was not a part of the Veterans Health Administration, but thanks to the dedication of a few visionaries who believed in what our profession could bring to veterans, that's changed in a big way and it's continuing to change even today.

Today we'll be talking with one of the people who helped make that happen. Dr. Anthony Lisi. He's the chiropractic program director for the va. He's in charge of overseeing everything from clinical care to education to research.

We'll talk about how chiropractic became part of the VA program, what it looks like in practice today, and where it's headed in the future. If you're a student thinking about your future, a doctor, curious about any new opportunities that are out there, or really just someone who wants to better understand how chiropractic serves those who served us, today's episode is for you, because today's episode isn't just about chiropractic in the VA.

It's about the purpose, progress, and the power of care the chiropractic brings to the lives of veterans.

Dr. Anthony Lisi, thank you for joining us today on chiropractic.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Oh, it's my pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

Jon Kec

Absolutely. And I know this has been a, a bit of a work in progress to get this set up, and I know there's been a lot of legwork on your side. So I want to first and foremost just start by saying thank you for, for doing all the work you had to do to, to make this happen today. I know it was a lot of back and forth with people to make sure that everybody was happy, so thank you for taking that on for us.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

I'm glad to do it.

Jon Kec

Why is this important to the profession as a whole and me as just a provider? I'm not in the VA system. Why am I gonna keep listening to what we're talking about today?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Well, I think two reasons clearly, the, the most important aspect of the VA chiropractic program is the fact that we're able to contribute to VA's mission of providing care for the men and women who served our country.

And that in itself is the paramount reason why we exist in VA. And I think any chiropractor who has that type of patriotic view towards our veterans. Should feel, um, some pride and some commitment to that aspect. But aside from that, VA is the largest integrated healthcare system in the United States, and it has, it's a very far reach that extends outside the va, a lot of impact in, in healthcare outside va. So because the chiropractic program now can integrate in. Clinical training in research and in expanding our, uh, ability to, to deliver patient care. It has far reaching impacts on chiropractic integration even outside the VA walls.

Jon Kec

Well, let's, uh, let's dive in. So, uh, this is a topic I've been pushing for, uh, for a while. I, I think it's a, it's a really. Great thing to talk about, but I think it's also something a lot of providers don't really know much about.

I personally went through a really, really short VA rotation during my education at National, I think it was two weeks. It's been a few years, so I don't remember the exact timeframe, but it was short one way or the other. Um, and it was a very limited. Kind of view into what the world in, in a VA clinic is.

So I'm hoping you can, you can take us a bit deeper and, and talk about some of the ins and outs, what that means to the, the profession as a whole, what that means to the patients in the VA and, and maybe some things on the horizon for the program and, and the future of the VA relationship.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Yeah, that sounds great. Love to do it.

Jon Kec

So what is your role today with the program?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

So I'm the National Program Director for chiropractic Care for va. Um, the program started as a result of some legislation that was passed almost more than 25 years ago now. So there was, um, Congress mandated the VA to begin providing chiropractic care.

As a result of, um, lobbying by the a CA as well as a number of, uh, veteran service groups, the veteran, it was a strong demand among veterans to begin having this care provided. So in late 2004, VA began hiring its first group of chiropractors and started with, uh, 22 dcs. And so one DC at each of 22 of its major hospitals Back then. Then over time the program slowly grew and it was determined to have some, um, central coordination. So in 2007, I was, uh, appointed to the national program director, which is what I, I am right now.

I still see patients, uh, week every week. But my role is primarily administrative in, in, uh, overseeing the program nationally.

Jon Kec

And so those few years before the 2007 mandate, were you in active care inside one of the clinical locations?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Oh, yes. I was hired at the, um, VA Connecticut Hospital in West Haven, Connecticut. I was a full-time clinician for the first three years. It was the first, um, chiropractor hired in a full-time position nationally.

Then over time, my, my role slowly decreased the clinical effort and increased in, in the, uh, um, administrative and then later on some research time as well. But I've been in full-time, um, I, I've been in, in continuous, uh, patient care in the VA system since 2004. Now.

Jon Kec

And, and what, I know you said you'd always had kind of had this idea, this, this integrative model idea in your world, but what really kinda ramped you up to that start in 2004? Was it just an ad you saw somewhere that you, you know, a job ad I should say? You answered or, or how'd you get into it?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Oh sure. So the VA program was announced in in 2001, and it took a few years before VA actually operationalized it and began hiring chiropractors. So I had been following this because I was terribly interested in this system, but, I did not create the positions, those initial positions. I was, uh, I applied for the position at the VA Connecticut Hospital.

It was extremely competitive. I was told after there were 150 applicants, and, um, and I was just selected, uh, I was, I was the, my supervisors later told me the things that they were looking for was someone who had clinical practice experience as well as some. Academic and scholarly, uh, in an integrated setting.

I had managed to do some of that during my career. So that's how I got started. Um, and then, uh, fast forward a number of years, and now my role is actually to help create more of these positions for other chiropractors to come in.

Jon Kec

And I think that's maybe a good place to go. So you said 2004 things started. 22 providers or 22 clinics. 22 providers I should say. Where are we at today?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

So we have, uh, just under 500 dcs in the VA system right now. We've got a, a little more than 450, uh, employees. We have 10 residents and a couple of dozen contractors in, in different capacities that are all providing care in VA uh, medical centers across the country.

Jon Kec

Amazing. I love that number. That's great.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

We've been growing steadily each year and, and we, uh, we don't think we're at our cruising altitude yet.

We still have a way to go.

Jon Kec

So what kind of things are, are as a profession, the VA program, what exactly is that impacting? Are we talking about like Medicare, Medicaid, maybe reimbursement, maybe view of the profession? Are we talking about private healthcare's, view of the profession? What kind of stuff?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

So I, I, I wouldn't put any impact on Medicare Medicaid, but let's think about, um, a few areas where there is a really strong impact. So the first is in. Healthcare provider training, which might not seem important at first, but if you think about it, VA system is the largest system for clinical training of healthcare providers in the US.

Each year, approximately 120,000 clinical trainees do some of their training in VA facilities, and these could be internal medicine residents or neurology fellows, or orthopedic surgeons as well as PAs, nursing, et cetera. of the people that train in VA systems go out into private practice in other areas outside VA. So the fact that we have a lot of these other medical providers who are now doing their training, where they're collaborating with chiropractors and where. Their clinical mentors are engaging them with referring patients to the chiropractic clinic at va. That sets a pattern, a training pattern that they learn in, in residency that helps build bridges when they're out in the community.

So the idea that so many prov medical providers are now being exposed to chiropractic care as part of their standard training, uh, which has really never happened before. Um, another area of impact is in. Education for chiropractors. You mentioned you had a, a limited experience when you were a student, but we've had this ability for chiropractic students to train in VA facilities that has been growing.

We estimate about over 2,500 DC students have done some training rotations in VA facilities over the past years and, um, and in many cases this gives them an opportunity to. Get exposed to more complex cases and, and team case management, even for students who don't have any aspiration to be part of a hospital system, the ability to increase their clinical acumen and exposure is, is another plus for the chiropractic profession in terms of its integration.

Then the last area that I think is, is also critically important is the ability for. Chiropractic research to be conducted in the VA system where we can partner with senior researchers and use VA's very robust electronic health record data system where we can, uh, and we have, um, done some really interesting work showing the value of chiropractic care to a system.

Jon Kec

I definitely wanna come back to some of the research stuff, but we've talked about this a couple times. There's, there's the integrated nature of the VA system and how those residents are in other medical disciplines that is, are getting exposure to chiropractic. But let's look at kind of the system as a whole. How does chiropractic really fit into that VA model of care?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

So by our National Policy Chiropractic Care. Is, um, at the full scope and training of dcs based on their licensure and training. Um, we have, um, uh, essentially the majority of what we do in VA is diagnosis and management of non-operative conditions. Musculoskeletal, neuromuscular, um, chiropractors are integrated in team care. In various settings, um, the top three departments that chiropractic clinics are, are housed within, are physical medicine and rehab, which is a little more than half are in there.

About 20% are in pain medicine departments and about 15% are in primary care departments. So we've seen that we can successfully integrate a chiropractor into various clinical service lines. Depending on the needs of the, the facility and the training of the DC

Jon Kec

Is chiropractic care looked at as like a first line care for the, the majority of cases, or is that still kind of in flux? Obviously clinical decision making will play into that in patient presentation, but how, how maybe how many people coming in through the, the physical medicine and rehab aspect are seeing chiropractic as a first line of care?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

It's, it's very hard to quantify that because chiropractic, even though it's growing in in va, we're still a small piece. So we have many facilities where the, the, access to the chiropractic care might come downstream where they maybe have seen other first.

But we also know that in many instances. the the chiropractic clinic is becoming the clinic of choice for referring providers, particularly primary care providers. So it's, it's important to keep in mind, VA is a, um, a system that's built around a primary care model. So the vast majority of patients, if they come in with any type of a, of a new complaint or, or a new to the system, they're seen by primary care first, and then depending on their needs, they could be referred elsewhere. So. Um, we've seen this time and again, the, the use of chiropractic care by primary care providers referring is becoming, uh, more and more of a top priority. Another way to look at it is many of the patients that we see in VA chiropractic clinics across the board. Are coming to us as their first chiropractic visit, and they tell us that, you know, they might not have chosen chiropractic had it not been that their primary care doc or their PA or, or pain doc was the one who referred them.

So being part of this system actually engenders that type of increased, um, uptake by the patients who maybe wouldn't have considered chiropractic care.

Jon Kec

This may not be something you can really speak to, but maybe in your personal experience when you've had conversations like that, how many of them have turned into longer term chiropractic patients, whether that's inside the VA system or if once their case is resolved, they need to look elsewhere for, for kind of lifestyle care or things like that. But how many kind of convert over to, to, to, chiropractic converts we'll say.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Yeah, I, I think the majority, I mean, I think, um, I mean, clearly as with any type of patient with chiropractic care, some patients respond better than others, and it's just depending on the nature of, of the condition and, and such. But with, with most of our patients, we see such an appreciation for the fact that they now have access to chiropractic care. And even for some where it may not have been the, the, the stellar gangbuster outcomes,

They're still delighted to have had that, that experience and, and they walk away with a positive impression of the profession. I had a, I, I put it in context. I had a, um.

An old World War II veteran that I saw several years ago, and he was, um, uh, a very distinguished, he was a former army ranger who was in actually the, the landing in Normandy, in, in Normandy on D-Day. And he came in and told me that, um. Said, I've always heard sketchy things about chiropractors, but because you know, Dr. Jones, my primary care doc told me you guys are good and I, that's why I came to see you. So, so stories like that really, uh, speak to the value of that integration for, for changing opinions.

Jon Kec

Opening eyes in whatever way we can is fantastic. And you know, I, I love hearing that you've, you know, obviously 20, what, 21 years in the system now I'm sure you have a number of, of stories, probably very similar to that. But I love hearing that somebody that, I mean, I'm going to guess was probably in their sixties right at that time.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

No, he was in his late eighties at that point and had never seen a chiropractor.

Jon Kec

That, that you can have that kind of a, a, a trust in the system one, And then get them into the office, give them care, and who knows how many people they're gonna tell from there. That's fantastic.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Right. And we see that on, on the other end of the spectrum too, even with younger veterans who are in the post 9/11 conflicts. Some have, you know, we, we see some when they're just one or two years, um, out from, from leaving active duty and, and it could be their first experience as well.

Jon Kec

Let's, let's go back a little bit some of the research opportunities you've mentioned. So what kind of research doors has that VA integration opened for the profession?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Research is one of VA's statutory missions, so along with providing patient care, conducting research, and also, uh, conducting training for healthcare professionals is part of VA's core

mission. So the fact that we're in this system where research and education are valued, they're part of the currency of the realm that, uh, gives us great opportunity. And over time we've built the capacity. It's, it's, um, you know, many times with, with research projects, it takes a while to get things going and off the ground, but: we've, we've established the capacity.

At least I'll in, in a number of areas where non chiropractors are looking at chiropractic care as part of their research and studying how chiropractic care fits into the system. Uh, we've done work with my own group that we're really excited about. Very recently, as I mentioned before, VA has, um, a, a large electronic health record.

It was one of the, it was actually one of the first large scale. Electronic health records that were implemented. So we've got, um, years and years of robust clinical data that are able to be harvested in large data sets. And, uh, so we recently did a, a study that was published in the Journal of General Internal Medicine a few months ago. We looked at all the patients in the VA system in a, in a five year timeframe that were presenting to their primary care doctors or primary care providers.

Their first presentation of low back pain and were able to follow those who, who received care for low back pain in the VA system over the next year. And these were patients who were not taking opioid medications and wound up with a population of over 128,000 individuals, which is a really sizable number, and we're able to split those who had chiropractic care and those who didn't, and the ones who had chiropractic care in that following year had a 23% less likelihood of receiving a new opioid prescription compared to the group that didn't receive chiropractic care.

Jon Kec

That's awesome.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

And we're, we were able to see that very clearly and substantially along that the 12 month period, which just shows that having the opportunity for patients to access chiropractic care. Uh, and, and keep in mind, these were patients that were still. Seeing all the other providers in the va so they could have received an opioid if their, if their pain wasn't improving.

And this was when we controlled for all measures of complexity in patient age and disease severity. So things like that are, um, you know, to, to get data on 128,000, um, patients to do a a randomized trial is, you know, is just, uh. Impossible. It's not practical to do. So that's one area when we look at using the, the um, uh, care as it's occurring, which actually gives it a strength because this is real world care.

It was what actually happens in the trenches, what chiropractors seeing patients.

Jon Kec

Yeah, I was gonna say, I don't think that that number is feasible or achievable anywhere else. I, I don't even know if you could get large health systems to bind together and get you that much data.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Well, that's one of the, the values of this system. And now that we have a number of years of data on chiropractic care in VA, we're approaching our 4000000th chiropractic visit in, in, in total. So, um, so I know my team in, in, in, in my group as well as others are, are at the point to continue to refine our ability to use those data. And, but also VA could be and has been a site for prospective clinical trials. I'm actually part of a, of a large trial looking at chiropractic dose for low back pain and results for that will be coming out soon.

So it, it really provides the opportunity for the chiropractic care to be assessed at a very high level in a very well integrated system.

Jon Kec

Well what about just kind of the. DC off the street. Let's say they want to get involved. Do they have to be inside the VA system? Is there a way they can associate their clinic with the VA system? How can, how can I just not, not affiliated today, become a part of this care? This care model?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

So, this is a really important point. Most of the care, most of the care that VA is both a provider and a payer, and it's always been that way. So we have staff that work at VA facilities in every discipline, whether it's cardiology or chiropractic or anything. And, um, care is either delivered by providers in-house or if the care isn't available or if there's a. A rare specialty, let's say like obstetrics, which most VA facilities won't have an obstetrician on staff. Or if there's a backlog, a cardiologist is out sick and now there's a, there's a extra wait time, or the patient just lives very far away from a VA facility in any of those, um, in any of those situations. The VA uh, the veteran is eligible to receive. Care outside of the VA system where the VA covers the cost of that, and that's called our community care program. So VA community care could be Googled and all the information is public. So by by a congressional mandate, VA doesn't. Engage panels of providers ourselves, but we use intermediaries to, uh, identify the providers who have access to this community care system.

Currently, there's, um, um, tri West and Optum are the two companies, and this is all on, on the public side as well, an individual DC can interact with and can, um, join that network to have access to the VA community care system.

I can give a little more detail on the, the, some of the context of that, so in, in the, um, fiscal year 2025, which has closed, uh, over 400,000 veterans received VA chiropractic care, 180,000 of those were seen in-house by the 500 VA chiropractors. And 220,000 of those were seen outside in private DC office. In fiscal 25. There were just under 14,000 dcs who were part of that va, uh, community care network who were seeing VA patients.

So, so there really is, um, the opportunity for, for those DCs to engage in that regard. Of course, if there's a DC who has the specific drive to become a part of the system as a, as an employee or so on. We have pathways for, for training, for early career DCs. Our, our residency program has been an incredible feeder system for, for, uh, young DCs to get the training that that makes them strong candidates for these types of positions.

Jon Kec

And what about on the private side? So I'm just a private practice provider, wanna be part of the Community Cares program. Can you provide any insight in kinda what that process looks like?

Is it, is it an application process? Is it interviews, is it submitting billings?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

So it's an application process to one of those two, uh, third party administrators, either Optum or TriWest. If you draw a line through the middle of the country, the East coast is roughly on Optum and the West coast is roughly on Tri West.

So individual DC would apply. And this information is all on the, the, the public portal for providers on the community care network. Just anyone can go there and click on the four providers. Apply to either of those two depending on one, where one's, uh, practice is located and then that, um, like any other type of insurance panel, it depends on where they have a need.

If there, if there's, um, if there're full in one market or not, there might be some wait time, but ultimately the ability to then move forward is. Uh, coordinated by that third party administrator, either Optum or Tri West.

Jon Kec

Do you, do you know right now offhand, are there needs on both sides of the country or one area over the other?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

There, there, there are needs across the country.

Uh, probably almost in every state there, there's room where. Where more DCs can be part of this community care network. It might be possible that certain metro areas are full and others not. And I don't have the, you know, deep data on that, but, but certainly it's an area where we expect this to continue as we grow chiropractic care and VA it will continue to be a blend. Care that we provide in house with employees or staff chiropractors as well as care that we purchase from private dcs and, and we see that continuing to grow in both domains over the next five years.

Jon Kec

Now you touched on one little, uh, piece a second ago too, the residency program. Talk to us a little bit more about that. How can our student DCs or early career DCs, what options are, are there for them as well?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

The, um, the residency program that we, we launched in VA in 2015, um, has, has really been a, um, a, a foundational element of our program of, of the overall chiropractic program in va. And it's, it's really been a fundamental, um, advance in chiropractic education. We started with the principle of. Thinking, what would it take to build upon the competencies that an early, that a a

young graduate has when they leave chiropractic school? What are some of the attributes that might make them stronger to fit into a hospital system, whether it's a VA or other medical system?

And we develop this over multiple years with input from multiple experts in the chiropractic professional world as well as the medical world. And came up with this one year of postgraduate training that is full-time, uh, in-person at, at a VA facility where the resident provides chiropractic care in the chiropractic clinic and is mentored under the guidance of, of senior DCs, but then also the resident rotates through other key departments, just like all other medical residents do.

They'll spend time in the primary care clinic or in pain medicine or in neurology. They also engage in scholarly activities where they might do individual projects or present, uh, talks to other departments. Um, we started with five programs back in 2014, 15. Um, those all did exceptionally well, and then we expanded to 10. About five years later, and we've been at 10 for a number of years, but just recently for this next iteration, we're increasing from 10 to 19 slots. So for the next group of residents, we'll be taken in for training. That starts July 1st of 26, and it's a one year period. It goes from July one to June 30 every, every 12 months.

And the, um, the recruitment for that is handled through a, a national, uh, common application and match process that is, uh, actually run by the Association, association of Chiropractic Colleges.

We partner with them to launch that, so it's a national match that is very much like the match that is used in medical or dental or optometry residencies.

Jon Kec

And for that, is it for the people maybe interested in pursuing the program, do they have to be graduated and licensed or can they enter during their late clinical schooling?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

They have to be graduated to enter at, so one can apply to the program before graduation, but needs to have graduated and have a DC before the July 1st start date.

They don't need to be licensed to start, because as a resident, they're under the rubric of the attending physicians. But a, a, um, criteria for completion of the residency is that if someone enters not licensed, they must attain a license before they graduate the residency. Because our goal is that we want people to be successful and be able to be positioned to move on to these, uh, um, clinical appointments in, in VA or in other medical systems.

Jon Kec

Sure hit the ground running right as they, they transition out the end of June. Gotcha. Okay. Well that's, I, I think a lot of information for, for our listeners, thank you for, for everything there.

But if there was one. Most important thing about your experience with the VA, your understanding of its value and its impact on the chiropractic profession as a whole that our listeners need to hear again.

What is it?

Dr. Anthony Lisi

I'll reiterate, the most important thing we do is serve veterans. And we focus on that and our, our, all of our listeners should value that and, and keep that foremost in mind. But the impact of the profession that, uh, the best way we can continue to, to do this is by, to continue to grow and elevate our our opportunities, elevate our competencies. Because so much chiropractic care now that VA provides is provided by DCs out in the field as opposed to the 500 odd DCs in VA.

I think it's critical that every field DC who sees VA patients realizes that they're part of the team now. They are the good results they get with their patients, the high quality care they provide. The high quality documentation that communicates back, all of that helps to elevate the, the, um, reach of the profession and elevate our ability to continue to serve veterans and expand the profession.

Jon Kec

I love all the info today. I love all the conversation. Thank you, Dr. Lisi, so much for the time, for the peek behind the curtain into a world I didn't know much about. I'm, I'm gonna guess a lot of our listeners probably don't know very much about, but a lot of really good stuff happening and a lot of good information on how people can keep educating themselves and, and really get involved in a, in a part of healthcare that I think is woefully underserved in a lot of ways.

Like, I think our, our veterans need so much support and so much care and they just. Need to know how to get in, need to have the people willing to do it, and, and I hope the chiropractic continues to be an ever-growing piece of that puzzle.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

Thank you for your interest. It's been a pleasure to be here and share this information.

Jon Kec

Absolutely. Well, have a fantastic rest of your day.

Dr. Anthony Lisi

You too.

Jon Kec

Thank you again, Dr. Lisi, and I think you captured the message and the spirit of today perfectly. The story of chiropractic at the VA is really a story about service. It's about a profession stepping forward to meet veterans where they are and where they're trying to get with compassion, skill, and the belief that every patient deserves a chance to move, live and feel better.

That's what chiropractic and the VA is all about. It's not about back and neck.

It's about restoring motion, hope and dignity. It's about giving something back to the people who gave everything for us and for every chiropractor who's ever wondered if what they do truly matters. This is your answer. It does To our veterans. Thank you for your service.

To our listeners, thank you for being a part of this conversation and to this profession to keep pushing things forward because when chiropractic shows up in the va, in our communities, in every life we touch, we're not just making adjustments, we're making a difference.

If this episode inspired you, share it, leave a comment and subscribe wherever you listen or remember. You can watch our full conversation on the NCMIC YouTube page. If you have questions or comments, send the show an email at askncmic@ncmic.com or reach out to me directly at jkec@ncmic.com. Thank for listening to this episode.

I'm Jon Kec, and this is Chiropractical.