



Health > Baby health > Real life

Did a chiropractor really break a baby's back? 7 things parents must know



With reports this week that a baby's neck was broken during a chiropractic treatment, isn't it time we got real about alternative therapies? Nicole Madigan investigates.



Do babies and chiropractors mix?

[Sunday newspapers](#) reported a shocking story of a baby's back being broken by a chiropractor – but the [Chiropractor's Association of Australia](#) says the story is “flat out wrong” and is working to retract the story.

Melbourne paediatrician Chris Pappas told the newspapers he cared for a four-month-old baby last year after one of her vertebrae was fractured during a chiropractic treatment for torticollis – a wry neck – which is

usually harmless in babies. He said the infant, who was rushed to Monash Medical Centre for treatment, was lucky to make a full recovery.

Victorian GP Dr Cameron Martin puts it more plainly: "There is absolutely no need for a baby – or a child – to have chiropractic treatment, ever."

"A chiropractor can not fix otitis media, baby colic, scoliosis, wry neck and they can't fix autism either. I would never send a child, or even an adult, to see a chiropractor."

Dr Martin says a baby that's unsettled or has any potential health issues should be taken to visit a GP.

"Chiropractors believe illness emanates from the spine and everything can be fixed with an adjustment – it's just not based on science, it's based on a belief," he says. "The biggest problem is that chiropractors now go to uni for five years so people think it's legitimate."

Do babies ever need to see a chiropractor?

Professor Alastair MacLennan, Vice President of [Friends of Science](#) in Medicine, says a three-month-old baby in Europe died after her neck was manipulated by a cranio-sacral therapist in 2009 (you can [read about it here](#)).

"No alternative therapies have scientifically sound benefits, but many have potential risks and major costs to the benefit of the purveyor," says Professor MacLennan.

"Most delay the child's access to legitimate medicine."

John Reggars, CEO and Vice President of [Chiropractic and Osteopathic College of Australasia](#), agrees there is little evidence to support the benefit of spinal manipulation – particularly on children – and his organisation recommends any parent wishing to have their baby treated by a chiropractor does so under the guidance of a doctor or paediatrician.

"We are registered as primary care practitioners which means we have an obligation to practice using an evidence-based approach," Mr Reggars says.

"We state in our policy that there is very little evidence to support spinal manipulation for infants but if parents want to do it, we suggest it's done under medical guidance."

What a Melbourne spine surgeon says about chiropractors

Orthopaedic surgeon [John Cunningham writes a blog](#) and has appeared on [ABC-TV's Catalyst](#) and says there are two kinds of chiropractors:

"There are those who tend to be younger, who are struggling to define their art form in terms of evidence and reproducibility. They tend to encourage sensible evidence based principles, concentrate on strengthening the spine, and treat spine-related symptoms. They are to be encouraged, because it is through them that chiropractors may gain some credibility in the medical community.

"Now let's talk about the others – the 'straights'; the vitalistic, intuitive, metaphysical practitioners who remain separate from the mainstream community, and who are determined to remain that way."

Reggars – unlike the Chiropractors Association of Australia – does not deny the Sunday newspapers story about the chiropractor breaking the baby's back, as he says he does not have the full details of the case.

Laurie Tassell, President of the Chiropractors Association of Australia, says the story of the baby with the broken back will be proven wrong and the report to authorities found the chiropractor did not cause the fracture.

He says he has been treating children and babies for 30 years, usually on referral from paediatricians and other health professionals.

"There is nothing more rewarding than a mum bringing a baby in with colic and then coming in the next day to thank you for the transformation you have made. Colic impacts on the whole family," Mr Tassell says.

"We use a very different technique on babies – it's not the way we treat adults. There is some evidence emerging that a chiropractor can help with colic."

7 things parents should know if they seek non-medical treatment

That's not to say that alternative therapies don't have a place, but it's crucial to seek medical advice before embarking on any alternative or complementary treatment, particularly when involving babies or children.

Dr Cameron Martin says there are several key things to remember when considering alternative or allied health practitioners, which he outlined in a report for [Australian Doctor](#).

Here are seven points to consider before diving into alternative therapy for your baby or child.

1. Just because a treatment is popular doesn't make it effective (or valid scientifically)

"Popularity is a not a measure of validity," says Dr Martin.

"We can all think of examples of popular activities that are not good for you – smoking, gambling and eating excessively.

"This is an absurd argument, yet is often the first 'evidence' of credibility put forward by complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practitioners."

2. Natural therapies are not always safe

According to Dr Martin, there is nothing inherently safe nor desirable about natural substances. In fact many toxic substances are entirely natural such as strychnine, nicotine and cyanide.

"Perpetuating the arbitrary distinction between 'natural' and conventional medicines is misleading," he says.

3. Alternative therapies can and do have side effects

"When you introduce any chemical agent to the body – drug or natural – you are manipulating a complex, dynamic system with numerous feedback loops," says Dr Martin. Which means there are always unintended consequences.

"The challenge is to find chemicals that do enough of the desired activity, without too much disruption to other systems."

Although many people believe natural therapies are without side effects, Dr Martin says this is far from true and often specific side effects are unknown.

4. Science (and medicine) is based on research and evidence

We rely on science to ensure our safety when it comes to travel and lifestyle choices, yet there's an ever-increasing tendency to reject science when it comes to our health.

“Australians enjoy mobile phones, air travel and electricity in their homes,” says Dr Martin.

“These technologies have been made possible by the discoveries of pure, hard science. The same objective methods have produced our present high standard of health.

“Many people are making decisions about their health based solely on anecdotal stories. The endorsement of this methodology is alarming.”

6. Alternative therapies are not evidence-based

According to Dr Martin, many alternative health practices have not evolved by research. “They were simply invented (such as homeopathy by Dr Samuel Hahnemann in the late 1700s).

“They are characterised by dogma and not subject to change as new knowledge is uncovered.”

Dr Martin says chiropractors hide behind universities and registration to legitimise their profession, but it is fundamentally a practice of belief, not science.

“Physiotherapy is a discipline based on research and observation. Osteopathy is based on the belief of balance, homeopathy on the belief that diluted water works and chiropractors, as a discipline is based on the belief that all illness emanates from the spine and can fixed by aligning the spine.”

7. Alternative therapies are harmful – one way or another

Aside from the fact, that, used in place of mainstream medicine, the use of complementary medicines can leave diseases untreated – causing serious illness or death – the mass misinformation being provided to the public causes significant problems to society as a whole. These include:

a. Poorer health choices. People who believe their symptoms are attributable to an incorrect diagnosis will pursue incorrect treatments.

b. Threats to public health initiatives. For example, parents deciding not to immunise their children or to use homeopathic immunisations.

c. Wasting scarce resources (public money and doctors’ consultations) as providers have to undo this misinformation and re-educate patients.

d. Promotion of disease mongering. Telling people they have diseases that they do not have has led to the apparent epidemics of “candidiasis”, “adrenal failure” and others.

8. Anecdotal evidence is not real evidence

According to Dr Martin, much of the so-called anecdotal evidence used to support alternative therapies is usually attributable to the placebo effect.

“Many doctors consider it unethical to provide placebo treatments because it is not being honest,” says Dr Martin.

“Most alternative treatments are placebos. Hence, they may appear to make people feel better, at least for a short time.

“Unfortunately, placebo treatments will not alter the course of cancers and this is where the use of placebo becomes problematic – providing false hope and making money from desperate people.”

But Dr Martin stresses that doesn’t mean practitioners are acting unethically necessarily. “Many believe in the products they promote. It is simply ignorance.”