



# Chiropractic Medicine and the Amputee

by Abbey Smith

*The physical strains of everyday life are enough to give most people back pain at some point in their lives, but for amputees, back pain can be a regular, and very aggravating, problem.*

**M**any amputees don't understand why their backs hurt so they visit their primary care physicians for help and to find answers to their questions. Oftentimes these doctors will prescribe medication and tell their patients about basic strengthening exercises. Medication, however, shouldn't be taken for long periods of time, and many basic exercises are difficult for amputees.

Bill Sheppard, DC, a chiropractor in Katy, Texas, and an amputee himself, knows firsthand about the back pain that amputees experience. Since he lost his lower right leg in a motorcycle accident 15 years ago, he has dedicated his work to helping fellow amputees overcome pain and regain muscle strength and physical ability.

Chiropractors understand human biomechanics, and they concentrate on healing the body naturally through weight training and strengthening muscles. Dr. Sheppard's specialized training in chiropractic medicine concerns itself with the

interrelationship of structure and body functions and utilizes natural, drug-less methods of treatment. Although medicine can help relieve pain, it shouldn't be the only resource used to help relieve it, Sheppard says.

"Medicine is great to temporarily relieve symptoms," he explains, "but medicine does not fix your back."

Amputees commonly come to him as a last resort, Sheppard says. About 15 of his patients are amputees, and he takes a little extra time with them to learn about their individual problems, discomforts and concerns, and then tailors the treatment to meet the individual's specific needs. He performs x-rays and utilizes modalities like traction, electrical stimulation, ultrasound, heat, and spinal adjustments to correct spinal misalignments. Usually one side of the back is rather high or rather low depending on the patient's amputation, he says.

Another factor to consider is the prosthesis, which is frequently fitted improperly and can also add

to the amount of pain the patient is experiencing. When a prosthetic limb fits properly, many secondary medical problems, such as back pain, can be avoided. On the other hand, a prosthetic limb that doesn't fit properly can alter people's balance, gait and movements, as well as seriously strain or harm their back. "Finding the right prosthetic limb and having it fit properly is very important," Sheppard explains. "It can change your life."

Treatment for back pain can include readjustment of the back to relieve some of the pressure in certain areas, usually around the disks or nerves. Sheppard also encourages his patients to join a gym and exercise to strengthen their bodies. In addition, he works with his amputee patients in a rehabilitation center and shows them how to properly stretch and exercise. Patients will visit Sheppard anywhere from a few times a week to once or twice a month, depending on the severity of the condition.

Educating his patients is another key

factor for Sheppard. He explains how ligaments, tendons, and disks function and how physical activity, amputation, and prostheses can affect them. He also likes to work with general care physicians to ensure that his patients are receiving the best care and advice possible.

“The most important thing – above chiropractic medicine and physical therapy – is a patient’s general health,” Sheppard stresses. “A lot of people just don’t know how to eat and exercise properly. I like to help patients devise an exercise regimen, but the hardest thing is trying to get them to do what they need to do to stay healthy.”

In addition to staying healthy, amputees need to maintain a positive attitude. Unfortunately, many doctors are misinformed about life after amputation and underestimate the activities amputees can perform. Some amputees can feel discouraged, but with a little time and practice, many can



*Bill Sheppard and his wife, Kim*



achieve their goals. Sheppard encourages amputees to live outside people’s stereotypes, to maintain a positive attitude and to look for hope, inspiration and motivation from others. Personally, Sheppard finds hope through his spiritual faith, his wife, Kim, and his children, Bryce and Briley.

“Go forward and don’t look back,” he advises. “Train your body hard and it will pay off in every aspect of your life – your mind, your body, and your spirit. You will be happier and healthier. Try just a little harder and you can do anything you want, and I’m living proof.”

Sheppard admits that he too was frustrated and even angry at times after he had his amputation. One day, however, he realized that he had to “pull himself up by the bootstraps” and get on with his life. Although he was somewhat embarrassed by his prosthetic leg in the beginning, he now says he is proud of who he is and that he wouldn’t trade his body with anyone else.

As a result, Sheppard likes to serve as an inspiration to his fellow amputees. He goes to hospitals and visits new amputees without telling them at first that he is also an amputee. “I just like to be-bop around the room for a couple of minutes, and then I mention, ‘Oh, by the way, I’m an amputee,’” he says. “I always enjoy meeting new amputees who are referred to me

by physicians. My heart lights up when I walk into the hospital room of a new amputee and see the smile on their face when they realize I am just like them ... normal.” ■

*Dr. Bill Sheppard, 38, runs a multi-disciplinary clinic in Katy, Texas, a suburb of Houston. He is a below-knee amputee who enjoys spending time with his family as well as weight lifting, wakeboarding and martial arts. For more information about Dr. Sheppard, visit [www.bakdoc.com](http://www.bakdoc.com)*

