

Pregnancy: a demographic study

Linda Laufer, BA, DC*

A retrospective study of 126 pregnant females, presenting to a chiropractor's office was made. The average age of the patient was 29.8 years. Their backgrounds were career oriented and for the majority, it was their first pregnancy. The most frequent complaint was lower back pain. The study outlines the necessity for further data on the role of the chiropractic management of the pregnant patient. (JCCA 1987; 31(4): 193-195)

KEY WORDS: pregnancy, low back pain, manipulation, chiropractic.

A large segment of the population, traditionally associated with low back pain, consists of pregnant women. Back pain in pregnancy has historically been accepted as the byproduct of a natural process resolving itself postnatally.¹ Unfortunately, chiropractors have done little to expand clinical awareness in this area. What data is available has been largely anecdotal. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the extent to which many chronic postpartum symptoms, of a musculoskeletal nature, can be attributed to lack of care during pregnancy and labour.

These patients, and their musculoskeletal problems, have been largely unexplored by the health professions. As indicated by present trends, the pregnant woman is looking for broader areas of support.² To many of them, this help should be provided by chiropractors. Fortunately, the birthing process, as well as the preparation for it, is now undergoing revolutionary changes. These changes have made the mother's comfort a priority. To this end, pre- and peri-natal methods, including fitness, yoga, Lamaze, LeBoyer, birthing rooms and centers, chairs, home birth and midwifery abound.³ This intensive interest in the total wellbeing of the mother can only have a positive effect on chronic maternal low back disorders which many times accompany pre- and peri-natal time periods.⁴

This demographic study focuses on females with musculoskeletal pain resulting from pregnancy. It was undertaken with the intent of accumulating information relative to a homogeneous group presenting itself for clinical care. The impetus to do so was twofold. Firstly, these women represent a large segment of the population which undergoes vast biomechanical changes and should therefore, be of interest to the chiropractic community. Secondly, this collected sample may help the practitioner to better anticipate the type of patient and scope of clinical problems he/she might encounter.

Method

This retrospective study reflects easily accessible data provided by reliable record keeping in one chiropractor's office. The determination that a number of patients were presenting with a

Une étude rétrospective de 126 femmes enceintes qui se sont présentées au bureau du chiropraticien a été effectuée. La moyenne d'âge des patientes était 29.8 ans. Leur formation était orientée vers une carrière et pour la plupart, c'était leur première grossesse. La plainte la plus fréquente était la douleur lombaire. L'étude a souligné la nécessité de données ultérieures sur le rôle du traitement chiropratique de la patiente enceinte. (JCCA 1987; 31(4): 193-195)

MOTS CLÉS: grossesse, douleur, lombaire, manipulation, chiropractique.

common factor, led to the compilation of the information presented herein. Parameters were deliberately restricted since the study went back to the records after the population presented. The sample of 126 women examined in this study, comprise a distinct group all of whom underwent prenatal care usually from obstetricians or general physicians. They received no noted musculoskeletal treatment from this avenue and hence, presented to the chiropractor as a primary care professional for disturbances or evaluation uniquely related to pre- and perinatal syndromes.

The data on the 126 patients presenting for care, was collected between January 1983 and November 1985. The information gathered was based on four areas at the time of presentation that included age, occupation, number of children and the major complaint. Information regarding the number of pregnancies resulting in miscarriages and/or abortions was not considered, since this data did not appear to be relevant to the goals of this study.

Results

The average age of the 126 women in this study was 29.8 years, with a range between 20 to 40 years. (Table 1)

Table 1: Age distribution of the presenting patients

Age	Number of patients	Percentage
20-25	18	14.2
26-30	54	42.8
31-35	44	34.9
36-40	10	7.9

A wide range of professions were noted. Forty-two (42) of the 126 women were public service professionals, the majority of which were educators. Others in this group included social workers, registered nurses, executives, therapists, lawyers, writers, physicians, and analysts. The next largest group represented the business community, made up mostly of secretaries, as well as bookkeepers, sales personnel, and agents. The next category comprised homemakers, followed by artisans

* Private practice, 150 Steeles Ave., East, Thornhill, Ontario.
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(eg. artists, musicians, designers, and potters). Interestingly, parahealth care professionals (eg. midwives, child care workers, reflexologists) only numbered 9. Students and unemployed women made up the remaining numbers. (Table 2)

Table 2: Occupations of the presenting patients

Occupation	Number of patients
Public service professionals	42
Business community	25
Homemakers	24
Artisans	15
Parahealth care professionals	9
Unemployed	7
Students	4

With respect to the number of women presenting for care, as compared to the number of children, 88 (69%) presented with their 1st child, 32 (25.3%) with their second and 7 (5.5%) with their third. In the latter group, 2 of the 7 women were under care during the pregnancies of all 3 of their children and two others underwent care with 2 of their children.

The last area examined was the area of "major" complaint as verbalized by the patient. In many cases, there were 2 or 3 areas that affected the patient. Of all the complaints, lower back pain represented 61.5% of the total, far outreaching the other conditions. (Table 3)

Table 3: Frequency of complaints in pregnant women

Complaint	Number of patients	Percentage
a) low back pain	88	61.5%
b) check up	15	10.4%
c) thoracic pain	10	6.9%
d) sciatica/general leg pain	8	5.5%
e) pubic pain	7	4.8%
f) buttock pain	4	2.7%
g) hand/arm pain	3	2.0%
h) headaches	4	2.7%
i) ischial tuberosity	1	0.7%
j) general discomfort	1	0.7%
k) decreased mobility	1	0.7%
l) foot pain	1	0.7%

Discussion

In regard to the presenting complaint, it is not surprising that the chief complaint of low back pain was the most frequently listed by these patients. This fact may be largely due to the biomechanical as well as the biochemical changes that affect the pregnant female. The second most common reason for seeking help was, as indicated, a check-up. This was a most gratifying

situation and was due largely to the midwife community who referred women to this office, in order to determine pelvic mobility before labour. In as many instances as possible, husbands and coaches attended one appointment to learn methods of maintaining pelvic mobility and coping with back labour. Medical referrals were primarily concerned with frank pain syndromes.

Thoracic pain was primarily exacerbated by long periods of sitting and was easily managed. Sciatica, so commonly believed to be associated with back pain in pregnancy, was not seen to affect a large number of patients. However, of all presenting complaints, pubic pain was the hardest to alleviate. This was always accompanied by back pain in the sacroiliac region. The later the patient presented with it the more difficult it was to relieve the symptoms.

The remaining complaints were attributable to decreased joint mobility except for carpal-tunnel syndrome. All were aggressively treated and alleviated.

In this particular practice, the most commonly presenting factors included a young professional woman, experiencing low back pain and expecting her first child. The number presenting with their first child far exceeded the groups expecting their second or third child. Those expecting their second exceeded those expecting their third. It may be that those who did not utilize chiropractic care originally did not tend to seek it out later. However, this must be more closely followed since this may also reflect the trend to have fewer children.

The majority of care seekers were twenty-five to thirty years of age. Their backgrounds were career oriented. Both these factors indicate a degree of life experience which enables such a group to make considered choices. This speaks well for the profession which is regarded as a viable, and potentially successful avenue for dealing with uniquely gestational problems.

Conclusions

Relative to the major complaint, low back pain was the most frequently cited. It is clinically important that this is in evidence as a repetitive occurrence and not a universal assumption. This enables the chiropractor to instill a degree of psychological well-being as well as compliance on the part of the patient.

Finally, it is with first time pregnancies that the majority of patients seek care. These women must be followed in order to determine whether chiropractic is incorporated in subsequent prenatal care to determine its perceived efficacy. Until further investigation reveals evidence concerning the efficacy of care, treatment schedules, and amenable syndromes, chiropractors must limit themselves to reliable information and not general speculation about the effectiveness of manipulative therapy in the pregnant female. Guidance provided by chiropractors must therefore, be authoritative and relative to our field of expertise as the facts become clarified.

The work necessary to be accomplished in this area is something this author looks forward to. The pregnant popula-

tion is beginning to turn to the chiropractic community for help with what has been considered to be unavoidable musculoskeletal symptoms in pregnancy. Assurances can be provided that the patient's problems are not unique, that her age is not necessarily a negative factor in her biomechanical problems and that the majority of women seeking chiropractic care are primipara.

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