

Thurman Fleet, D.C. and the Early Years of the Concept-Therapy Institute

A Presentation to the Association for the History of Chiropractic at the 17th Annual Conference on
Chiropractic History, Texas Chiropractic College, February 23, 1997

by

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Acknowledgments

Preparation of this paper was supported by the Concept-Therapy Institute, the National Institute of Chiropractic Research, the Texas Chiropractic College and the Los Angeles College of Chiropractic. We would like to thank James C. Drain, D.C., Ph.C., Robert D. Davison, D.C., C.C.S.P. and the librarians of the Texas Chiropractic College for their valuable input and assistance. The authors are solely responsible for the content of this paper.

Suggested Slides:



Suggested Script:

The Concept-Therapy approach to chiropractic was created by George Thurman Fleet, D.C. Dr. Fleet was born in Blacksburg, Virginia on September 14, 1895 and grew up in several Virginia communities, where he completed the sixth grade. Like many chiropractors and future chiropractors, Fleet served during World War 1 with General John J. Pershing's Allied Expeditionary Forces in France. He was assigned to the U.S. Army's 26th Infantry, First Division. Fleet arrived in Europe as a sergeant, but rose to the rank of captain through a battlefield commission. Among his decorations were the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, the Purple Heart and France's Croix de Guerre. In later years he was an active member of the Legion of Valor, to which he was admitted on November 21, 1919.



During the 1920s he earned his living as a rather successful sales representative for the Weber Company, a vendor of meat display cases. His skills as a salesman would serve him well in later years as he promoted his business building seminars and developed his institute.

As a result of wounds suffered in combat, army medical authorities informed him in 1929 that he had only a year to live. Abandoned by the medical profession, Fleet visited a chiropractor in Corpus Christi, Texas, a Dr. Anderson, and began the task of restoring his health.



“Capt. Thurman G. Fleet”; from
The Dixie-Chiro, 1931

Impressed with the health improvements he experienced, he enrolled in the Texas Chiropractic College (TCC), then located in San Antonio, in 1930. However, his enrollment records indicate matriculation on May 28, 1931. His photograph in the TCC’s 1931 yearbook, *The Dixie-Chiro*, suggested his motto, “Where there is a will there is a way,” a harbinger perhaps of his future endeavors. However, he left TCC before completing the course, and conducted a practice at his home in San Antonio in the then unlicensed state of Texas.



In 1935 Fleet returned to TCC to complete his coursework and received his diploma on June 1 of that year. Subsequently, a collaborative practice, with his one and only partner, Woodie H. Alexander, D.C., was established in downtown San Antonio. Harry A. Porter, D.C., who had advised Fleet to enroll at TCC in 1930 and later became a Logan Basic Technique practitioner, was a member in the first class in Concept-Therapy offered at TCC some 13 years later



At first, Dr. Fleet followed rather closely the methods and theories he had learned at TCC, but gradually he grew concerned that not all patients responded equally well. Troubled by the unevenness of his clinical results, Fleet began to experiment informally in his practice by keeping meticulous records of his clients’ outcomes. In 1931 he underwent a “peak experience” which brought him in contact with a “cosmic consciousness.” This experience led him to formulate the principles that would become C-

T. These ideas involved:

...teaching that each individual is a triune being - consisting of a body, mind, and soul. Further, it [C-T] teaches that any of these parts can become out of harmony, one with the other, and illness will be the final product.



James R. Drain, D.C., 1937

Fleet soon contacted his mentor, TCC's president James R. Drain, D.C., with whom he sought to share his insights. Drain listened, and proposed that Fleet continue with his informal investigations for 10 years. If, after this time, he still felt that his new methods were worthwhile, Drain would be willing to spend more time with the novel procedures.

According to Dr. Drain:

He did that very thing. For ten long years he practiced Concept-Therapy Chiropractic in San Antonio, and at the ten-year expiration he came to me with thousands of affidavits and testimonials, many of them from prominent people whom I knew. I then granted Dr. Fleet an audience, and slowly and carefully he explained his discovery.

During 1932-1942 Fleet conducted a very large practice of chiropractic and his embryonic C-T at several locations in San Antonio. His total patient case load rose to 1800 individuals, and as many as 250 patient-visits per day. He advised his patients:

We want you to know, in the beginning, that we recognize the fact that nature and nature alone is the one and only curative power. There isn't a doctor on the face of the earth that ever cured a disease. The doctor's part in the curing of disease is to bring the patient's body, mind and soul into a condition where nature may begin her cure. We want you to know that the Universal Health Foundation has dedicated itself to the truth and that we will not, under any circumstances, commercialize our patients or our work. Our method of handling the sick is based on truth and common sense. We give you the foundation upon which you can grow health. We want you to know that it is impossible for you to purchase health from us. Health must be attained by correct living. There is no other way. We know how you can attain health and we can give you this information and we can do our part in releasing your nerves so that they can grow health, but that is all we can do. The rest is up to you and to you alone.

By the mid-1930s Fleet's clinic, then named the Universal Health Foundation and located on the sixth floor of the Milam Building in San Antonio, had expanded considerably beyond the "straight chiropractic" concepts taught at his alma mater. The Universal Health Foundation advertised in the local newspapers as "The Department Store of Health." A multi-disciplinary team, including chiropractic and allopathic practitioners, provided medical, manipulative, massage, physiotherapeutic, dietetic and educational interventions to patients who enrolled for a pre-paid program of health care. A pamphlet distributed to patients indicated:

We make the claim that we have discovered the cause and the cure of all -- internally created disease -- and that our discovery will eventually be accepted by all classes of doctors. The methods that we use do not conflict with any other system of healing; we believe in them all. We have endeavored to extract the **truth** from each system and combine all this **truth** into one system.

The inclusion of at least one licensed medical practitioner, a Dr. Barker, provided legal protection for Fleet and fellow DCs at the clinic in the then chiropractically unlicensed state of Texas, at least for a while. Fleet was frequently targeted for prosecution by the local medical establishment, who were outraged by his prominent advertising for his clinic and health plan. The seemingly irrepressible chiropractor was usually able to rely upon his medical colleague to offer the requisite prescription for the chiropractic care he provided. However, eventually “the medical profession, through politics, forced discontinuance of the clinic.”

During the years of his practice with Alexander, Fleet worked on his first textbook of C-T. By 1944, he had turned his practice over to Alexander, and began to teach C-T to other chiropractors. In May, 1944, the first formal course in C-T was held in San Antonio, as noted in an address Fleet gave at the TCC in July of that year:

Two months ago it was my happy privilege to introduce to the chiropractic profession a new system of healing to be used with chiropractic. Those of you who attended the class sat for many hours and received instruction concerning the treatment of MAN, not just man's body but the entire man - body, mind and soul. This course of instruction has been named CONCEPT-THERAPY. Believing that the information embodied in this course could be of much benefit to chiropractors, I assembled the first class of twenty-five of San Antonio's best known chiropractors. After receiving the instruction, these doctors were requested to apply the new system in their practice, to test it out thoroughly. Then, after two months had elapsed, they were asked to reassemble so that we might secure a report from them as to the advisability of recommending the system to other chiropractors.

Tonight, the two months have passed; and, in addition to the graduates of that first class, we have with us many fellow chiropractors, their wives and relatives. All are interested in hearing what these graduates think of Concept-Therapy.

Before asking some of the doctors for a report, I would like to say that Dr. James R. Drain, president of Texas Chiropractic College, was an interested student in the first class. Dr. Drain attended each lecture; and after applying the system to a few of his difficult cases, he became so enthused that he granted me permission to appear before the faculty of the Texas Chiropractic College in order that I might outline this work to them with a view of having them teach it to the chiropractic profession at large. I am glad to report that Concept-Therapy has been presented to the Texas Chiropractic College. It will be included in their regular course of chiropractic instruction, and advanced classes will be given to graduate chiropractors all over America.



Fleet was especially pleased to have Drain assist in teaching these post-graduate seminars. His method of stimulating the interest of his chiropractic mentor was dramatic. Fleet had thousands of his patients' testimonials framed, and these were dumped on the lawn of the TCC by a two-ton truck. Although C-T represented a distinct departure from the straight chiropractic concepts which Drain had nurtured since his days as a student at the PSC, the TCC leader became a very enthusiastic proponent of C-T. At one time, circa 1944, the idea of locating C-T headquarters on the campus of the TCC was contemplated, but did not eventuate.



In 1949 a 317 acre tract of land north of San Antonio was acquired, which became the Concept-Therapy Institute's international headquarters. Under Dr. Fleet's supervision, the Institute became a not-for-profit, tax-exempt educational corporation, in which form it continues today.

Fleet was aware but untroubled by the discrepancy between D.D. Palmer's mandate that "Chiropractors correct abnormalities of the intellect as well as those of the body" and his rejection of Willard Carver, LL.B., D.C.'s recommendations that "suggestive therapeutics" be included in the practice of chiropractic. Like many chiro-practors who were familiar with the elder Palmer's teachings, Fleet believed that doctors must avail themselves of all rational methods of helping their patients, and taught his followers a form of hypnotherapy.



1946 at Spears Hospital in Denver; L to R: J.F. Vannerson DC, James R. Drain DC, Thurman G. Fleet DC, and Raymond L. Nimmo DC

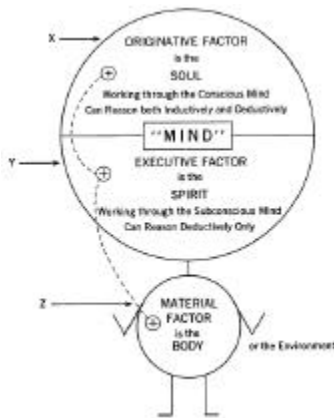
James R. Drain was only one of several prominent chiropractors who Fleet recruited as C-T instructors and endorsers. Among other early advocates of C-T theories and procedures were Raymond L. Nimmo, D.C., James Parker, D.C., Leo Spears, D.C., Texas State Chiropractic Association president Hugh Warren, D.C., and TCC faculty members Charles B. Loftin, D.C., Julius C. Troilo, D.C., H.E. Turley, D.C. and Herbert E. Weiser, D.C. Many current adherents to C-T methods are second and third generation chiropractors whose families have studied C-T over decades.



"August 1952 Teachers' Class" at the Concept Therapy Institute; James Parker, D.C. is sixth from right in the back row

Fleet adopted a vibrational etiology for some diseases, not unlike that espoused by Albert Abrams, M.D. and practitioners of radionics. He drew upon D.D. Palmer's three causes of subluxations (toxins, trauma and auto-suggestion) to create a trichotomous classification system for diseases: organic, structural and functional, and believed that suggestive therapeutics were essential to comprehensive health care. He emphasized to his chiropractic audience:

As we reflect on the Principle of Chiropractic, we say with all sincerity that the Chiropractor must realize he is dealing with something more than just the human body. A Chiropractor cannot ignore the fact that there are doctors who are now engaged in correcting functional disease through the medium of the mind. Also, the Doctor of Chiropractic who knows nothing about the spiritual organism of his patient and how it may be out of harmony with the mental and physical will pass by the wayside in the future.



Fleet's teachings offered a vitalistic understanding of human behavior, not unlike the theosophy of the Palmers, which he presumably learned under Drain's tutelage at TCC. Simple diagrams of the "structure" of personality were introduced, and were adopted by Parker's subsequent seminar series. Fleet repeatedly focused on this triune of body, mind and spirit:

You doctors all have a diploma in Chiropractic. This means that you have studied the human body, and you should know enough about it that it will not be necessary for us to go into any teaching concerning how the body functions. We do, however, want you to have a clear understanding of the word *mind*. We also would like for you to have some information about the word *soul*, and finally we want to give you a general description of what is meant by the word *spirit*.

The cause of the patient's misfortune may, of course, be some physical thing that gets in his body from the outside - such as a splinter or a bullet - or an accident that breaks a bone.

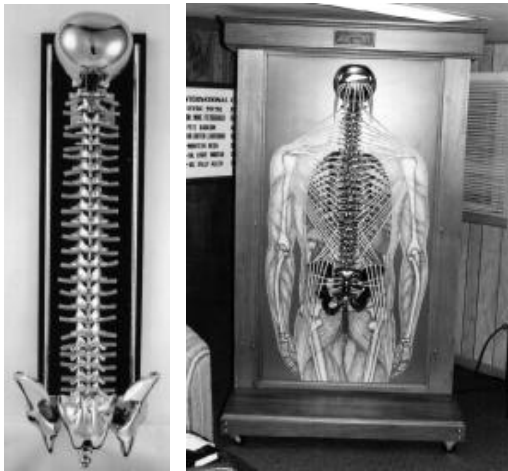
Next we would like to show you that certain images, ideas, and thoughts can be conjured up by his mind which will serve as an image to the great Innate. If the patient is persistent in thinking of it, it will penetrate down into the Subconscious and become an *order* for the Innate Intelligence to manifest in his body. That is why a great majority of physical disorders of the body originate up there in the thinking process.

The Soul, we are told, is the *man*. If a man will go out and deliberately engage in acts that are not conducive to health - such as the drinking of too much whiskey, the eating of too much food, the refusal to sleep, the refusal to take any exercise, the taking of poisons into the body, or otherwise to act in such a way that his poor body suffers - then that would be a disease that originated with the Soul. The man is deliberately doing these things when he knows that he should not. Perhaps he doesn't know, but at any rate it is an act that results in disease of the body.

When you have a clear comprehension of all of the component parts of man and know how they work, one upon another, then you will be able to return to your office and engage in your practice in a more constructive manner. You will begin to figure out if the disease that is in the patient's body is caused by some *physical thing*, some *mental thought*, or some *spiritual act*. When you have determined the cause all that you have to do then is to create in your own mind an image of what you want to see happen under treatment.

If you have the faith, and know how to give the right suggestion, along with your adjustment, then - assuming that you have acted in such a way that the patient also has faith in you and understands why you are doing this or that - Innate Power in your patient is turned loose, and it will reproduce in that man's

body, or in his environment, exactly what you have pictured in your image.



Another of Fleet's innovations was the Fleet's Spinal Demonstrator (FSD). The San Antonio clinician-educator had been troubled by the limited visual aids (e.g., model spines) available to chiropractors for teaching their ideas to patients. These spinal models, he complained, involved images of death employed to teach healthy living. "First conceived in 1930" to augment the courses he taught in practice building, a patent for the FSD was sought in 1937.



Thurman Fleet, D.C. displays Fleet's Spinal Demonstrator at the NCA's 1939 convention in Dallas

An early model of the device "was first exhibited at the home-coming of the Texas Chiropractic College in 1938," and a later model was displayed the following year at the NCA's convention in Dallas. Today, the FSD is manufactured and sold by the Concept-Therapy Institute, and has been accepted for rotational display by the Smithsonian Institute, National Museum of American History for the Medical Sciences Collection.

Business Concepts

Fleet's introduction of his spinal demonstrator was part of the course of instruction in practice building and salesmanship that he commenced in the late 1930s. Confronted with the reality of practicing outside of the network of referrals common to "regular" doctors, Fleet was immediately concerned with the issue of attracting patients to his chiropractic clinic, and went about it in his typically thorough and systematic fashion. The instructional package he devised borrowed liberally from salesmanship concepts outside chiropractic; he partitioned the process involved in obtaining new patients into four steps: the "approach," "creating interest," "creating desire" and "the close." Purchasers of the FSD received extensive reading materials which elaborated upon these ideas. It would be this program of salesmanship instruction which first brought the San Antonio chiropractor to nationwide attention among chiropractors.

The Wider Dissemination of Concept-Therapy

In the earliest years of the Concept-Therapy Institute instruction in C-T was available only to chiropractors. However, many practitioners wanted their spouses and office staff to learn more of the method, and so a program for the general public was developed. The course entitled “Innate Principles and Practice” is provided exclusively for chiropractors. Today, the Institute provides weekend seminars in C-T throughout the United States and Canada. Instruction is provided by independent contractors, including chiropractors, each of whom have several years of association with the Institute. Other health care practitioners, including medical doctors, psychologists, counselors, dentists and social workers, have adopted C-T methods.

Conclusions



In his later years, Thurman Fleet supervised the growth of his institute and the furtherance of instruction in C-T methods. Practice building and salesmanship decreased as a major component of C-T coursework, and he concerned himself increasingly with his ideas about the spirituality of man, as reflected in his many written works. He also grew increasingly intrigued with the role of muscles in physical illness, and may have influenced the work of Raymond L. Nimmo, D.C. of Receptor-Tonus Technique fame. Dr. Fleet died in 1983 at the age of 88 and was buried with full military honors at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery.

Fleet’s work is noteworthy in several respects. Firstly, it introduced a practical, home-grown variety of psychotherapeutics, a precursor in some respects to what has come to be known in academic circles as cognitive behavior therapy. In this way, his work lies within that body of literature that has been designated “mental health and chiropractic.” Secondly, Fleet’s C-T must also be viewed as an early, well-organized form of holistic health care. Concept-Therapy is holistic not only in the sense that it offers a multi-factorial theory and multi-disciplinary methods of health care, but also because the patient (or the patient’s Innate vital force) is seen as a potent, central and essential agent in recuperation. It is primarily the vitalistic core of C-T which distinguishes it from contemporary models of wellness. Indeed, shorn of its theological precepts, Concept-Therapy seems remarkable for its anticipation of the psycho-social models of illness that evolved within psychiatry and clinical psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, and which have more recently found favor in the wider health care community and the public.

Lastly, Fleet's work in practice-building is part of a larger stream of development within the chiropractic profession which links salesmanship with spirituality, psychology and Americanism. This tradition has its roots in the profession-building efforts of B.J. Palmer, the salesmanship courses of R.S. Marlow, D.C., also of San Antonio, George Shears, D.C. and his "God-Patient-Chiropractor" concepts, and finds more recent expression in the practice-management and practice-building instruction of Parker seminars and Sid Williams, D.C.'s "Dynamic Essentials." The full dimensions of this tradition is beyond the scope of this paper, but clearly warrants further investigation.

Thank you for your attention.

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