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## **Confronting Chiropractic's War at Home**

By Gerard Clum, DC and Lisa Burnstein Ramirez

"War is a poetic time to learn, firsthand, that there remain deep prejudices within our American medical community."

- Lt. Colonel Christopher Zelez, DC

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Make eye contact with this deeply weathered Marine, and you're soon riveted by the weight of his penetrating gaze. This is a hardened military man who has navigated years of high-stakes, serious terrain. Two tours of duty in Iraq, piloting armed helicopters while also facilitating labyrinthine networks of supply lines and operations on the ground, certainly would qualify as serious.

Intense, but not uneasy, Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Zelez seems inured to the ravages of living in a war zone. His message is steely and proud. Clearly, he's at peace with his role in America's most recent, albeit increasingly controversial war. But in spite of his dedication, one can detect a certain sadness and even disillusionment.

Without question, Lt. Colonel Zelez remains as passionate as ever about defending our American way of life; but while in Iraq, his respect for our country was tainted - not by the proverbial blood-stained, post-trauma baggage one might expect, but by the revelation that another insidious war still lurks at home. It is a war that should have been won a long time ago; a war that also threatens his "way of life."

"War is a poetic time to have to learn, firsthand, that there remain deep prejudices within our American medical community," waxes Lt. Colonel Zelez, a licensed chiropractor from Pennsylvania. "It's all about the relevance and credibility of chiropractic. The frustration I experienced in Iraq was a painful wake-up call."

Unfortunately, the prejudices that define the chiropractic profession's "war at home" found their way across thousands of miles of ocean and desert to rear their treacherous heads at a place and time when human suffering was at its worst.

"The ironies of this abound," chuckles Zelez. "There was so much need, and I was so ready to help." And he did until the system put a halt to his efforts.

"I didn't go to Iraq as a chiropractor," he says. "When I signed up, I was 23 years old and prepared to fight for my country. After graduating from Penn State, I was eager for a challenging job, but with a recession and no job prospects in sight, I joined up, plain and simple."

An active-duty Marine from 1983-1994, Lt. Colonel Zelez sustained a serious back injury in 1992, prior to his first tour of duty in the Middle East. The ensuing pain was severe and protracted, and it stymied medical doctors. Desperate for relief, he was forced to seek treatment off base from a chiropractor at his own expense.

Within days of receiving chiropractic care, his life was literally and figuratively reconfigured. Without knowing it, a gifted chiropractor had not only resurrected this young Marine's life; he also had redirected it.

Zelez's stunning recovery prompted a curious respect for a discipline he knew little about. Eager to learn more, his personal experience ultimately inspired this young officer's decision to become a chiropractor. In 1994, Lt. Colonel Zelez transferred to the reserves and began his studies at Life University, where he eventually earned his doctorate and became a licensed chiropractor.

"The decision to become a chiropractor was a very validating one. I knew I'd found something I could do the rest of my life that I believed in deeply." Dr. Zelez subsequently practiced chiropractic in a private setting in Philadelphia, until he was recalled to active duty in January 2004.

When Zelez returned to Iraq in 2004, he returned as a commissioned officer, but word soon got out that a trained chiropractor was in their midst. It wasn't long before desperate soldiers, American civilians engaged in rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure, and even Navy doctors started seeking him out for relief.

Under the existing military command, Lt. Colonel Zelez was not only allowed, but also encouraged to treat people during his free time. As such, in addition to his military duties as Current Operations Officer and Senior Watch Officer, Zelez saw a handful of people on a daily basis for chiropractic care.

"People came from the hinterlands with stress, back and neck injuries," he notes.

Dr. Zelez routinely received referrals from Navy doctors, and was actually requested to write an opinion in one particularly complex case. He considered his work at the time to be "very rewarding."

Then in the winter of 2005, there was a change in command, and the new general was swayed by recently appointed Naval doctors to assume a very different posture on this chiropractic initiative. Amid concerns about the issues of practicing without a license in Iraq, fears of liability and dictates of the Geneva Convention, Zelez was directed to refrain from further chiropractic activity, regardless of the pain and suffering that surrounded him.

"That's what's so ironic about this," says Zelez. "As if watching the toll that war takes on humanity isn't enough, I had to sit by and allow people to suffer who I knew I could help, but was officially prohibited from doing so."

Like many believers, Dr. Zelez contends that the chiropractic profession's unrelenting challenge is a war that could and should be won based on science and reason. But he understands that some wars are particularly tenacious because they feed on prejudice, fear and ignorance.

"Winning this war is going to take more," he admits. "The war that needs to be waged to finally, fully legitimize chiropractic care in the eyes of the American public and medical system, is a war begging to be fought."

Today, there are approximately 2 million patients in VA hospitals across America, with only 30 chiropractors to serve them.

"Unless we do something that is broadly supported, strategic and sustained, chiropractors will always be second-class citizens, relegated to the sidelines even during military conflicts when stress-related and physical injury abounds, especially with the spine and neck," Zelez says.

"My experience in Iraq only highlights the urgency of our situation. Thankfully, however, we have been fortunate to have just the right person with just the right credibility and passion at just the right juncture in history to spearhead our cause. Gene Veno has been that point man. He's been crafting a truly comprehensive national strategy to build respect and demand for chiropractic. As a career military man, I know opportunity when I see it. I can smell it. And I'm convinced it's time to put our resources behind the Campaign for Chiropractic. If we ever stood a chance of winning once and for all, it's now."

To back up his words, Dr. Zelez is an enthusiastic financial supporter of the national campaign to generate greater respect, appreciation and demand for chiropractic care. Zelez only hopes increasing numbers of chiropractors will be likewise inspired.

"Looking back at my experience in Iraq, I guess I always thought the 'glass ceiling' in American culture was experienced by women and ethnic minorities. I guess I thought wrong."

Dr. Zelez is currently readjusting to life as a civilian. He resides with his wife and son, and plans to open a private chiropractic practice in Greater Philadelphia, where he can continue his life's work.

The profession needs to inspire other doctors of chiropractic to see the value in supporting the Campaign for Chiropractic, just as this Marine, one of our own, has seen the wisdom and urgency to do so.

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*Editor's note:* In the Sept. 14, 2005 issue of *DC*, we reprinted an article originally published in *The Eagle and the Crescent*, the official newspaper of the II Marine Expeditionary Force (FWD). "Chiropractor Helps Comrades While on the Lookout for Insurgents" highlighted Lt. Colonel Zelez and his care of fellow Marines while stationed in Al Asad, Iraq, as a UH-1N Huey pilot with Marine Light/Attack Helicopter Squadron 775. To read that article in its entirety, visit [www.chiroweb.com/archives/23/19/02.html](http://www.chiroweb.com/archives/23/19/02.html).



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