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Debate

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Non-surgical spinal decompression therapy: does the scientific literature support efficacy claims made in the advertising media?

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Abstract

Background: Traction therapy has been utilized in the treatment of low back pain for decades. The most recent incarnation of traction therapy is non-surgical spinal decompression therapy which can cost over $100,000. This form of therapy has been heavily marketed to manual therapy professions and subsequently to the consumer. The purpose of this paper is to initiate a debate pertaining to the relationship between marketing claims and the scientific literature on non-surgical spinal decompression.

Discussion: Only one small randomized controlled trial and several lower level efficacy studies have been performed on spinal decompression therapy. In general the quality of these studies is questionable. Many of the studies were performed using the VAX-D® unit which places the patient in a prone position. Often companies utilize this research for their marketing although their units place the patient in the supine position.

Summary: Only limited evidence is available to warrant the routine use of non-surgical spinal decompression, particularly when many other well investigated, less expensive alternatives are available.

Background

Traction as a therapeutic intervention in the treatment of low back pain has existed for many years. Its use has progressed from simple static traction to intermittent motorized traction. A recent systematic review found only seven randomized controlled trials for intermittent motorized traction and six reported no difference in outcomes between the traction groups and the control groups [1]. The most recent incarnation of traction has been a form of intermittent motorized traction commonly referred to as spinal decompression therapy. Developers and manufacturers of the equipment along with clinicians often consider it to be a unique form of traction.

A perusal of any trade publication aimed at manual therapy professions will demonstrate intense marketing programs extolling the virtues of this new technology. An 86% success rate is claimed by many manufacturers and passed on to the consumer through individual practitioner's advertising. A recent limited online poll published in a chiropractic trade magazine stated that 38% of doctors of chiropractic are using the technology in their offices [2]. According to the Job Analysis of Chiropractic the presence of traction in the chiropractor's office has risen from 73.2% in 1991 to 80.6% in 2003 [3], which represents as many as 5,000 new traction units among chiropractors. With units priced from $9,000 to well over