



Cracking treatment: Dr Andrew Garbett helps a patient in his surgery

Can't see your GP? Try a chiropractor...

With a pain in her arm and aching feet, *Judith Woods* discovered a great alternative to a family doctor

You know how you sometimes meet someone and click unexpectedly – or, in my case, click repeatedly – and everything changes? If you've never had all 10 toes loudly cracked by a chiropractor, I couldn't recommend it enough. It was bizarre. Astonishing. Weirdly sublime.

I hadn't come about my feet. I'd actually come about chronic nerve pain in my right arm. Some days it is so bad I can't even lift a glass of water, and putting on (or taking off) a coat hurts.

To be perfectly honest, I wasn't entirely convinced a professional dedicated to manipulating backs, rather than my GP, was the best place to get help. But government reforms are dismantling the 70-year-old system that made GPs the gatekeepers for accessing all other care.

Last week, Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced that, as well as introducing more mental health workers, physiotherapists, paramedics and pharmacists are to be given more proactive roles in front-line care. Your chemist will see you now...

It marks a welcome sea change. All too often, we apologetically go to the GP about a complaint that we know needs a few sessions of physio, rather

than a course of medicine. Getting the right treatment right away will save time, money and free up family doctors. So, instead of seeking out my GP, I found myself at a chiropractor's, having my feet manipulated.

"Are you cracking my toes because my arm bone's connected to my foot bone, like the song says?" I wondered aloud and not entirely in jest.

My chiropractor, Dr Andrew Garbett, based at Spinex Disc Clinic in west London, was disappointingly non-

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committal. "I could explain how your musculoskeletal system works and how a lack of movement in the joints in your feet affects the way you move, which influences your back, your posture and, ultimately, your whole body including your neck and arm," he said, mildly.

"But in our consultation, you mentioned you have sore feet, so that's why I've moved down there."

I'm just delighted that he did. Using an "activator" tool resembling a cross

between a sonic screwdriver and a bolt gun, he also released the tightness across the soles of my feet with a series of dull thuds. It was a revelation because, like a great many people, I was under the impression that chiropractors were exclusively about cracking backs and necks, not tending painful feet and aching arms.

It was a fitness instructor friend who suggested I see a chiropractor as he felt my arm pain was probably referred, in that the real cause was somewhere higher up.

Dr Garbett, who is also a sports masseur and has treated Premiership footballers, manipulated my arm and concluded that the issue was more muscular than skeletal and did indeed start in my shoulder and neck.

"I'm releasing the muscles to lengthen them and soften them and remove the block on motion that has occurred," he said, as he worked his fingers into the knots around my neck and shoulder.

Then he prepared me to have my neck "cracked", gently taking me through the motion first before doing it. It was loud, not altogether pleasant, but necessary; immediately afterwards, I felt better and my range of movement was freer.

"This has been building up for years and now your body simply can't tolerate it any more. The pain is an unequivocal signal that something has to change," he said.

According to figures from Arthritis Research UK, one in five will go to our GP every year with a complaint, such as back pain. Treatments account for £4.8 billion a year, or around a third of NHS planned spending. Yet very few health trusts will fund chiropractic treatment because it's classed as an alternative or complementary treatment.

A great many of us (myself included) are either reluctant to pay for treatment, or it simply doesn't occur to us to go anywhere other than the GP. My initial appointment cost £85 and thereafter £55; after a few weeks, it feels like money well spent.

"Here in Britain, we automatically go to the GP when we have a joint problem," says Dr Garbett, "but GPs are not specialists. We are able to diagnose conditions, so if we spot something, we can refer a patient to the right expert. I've had patients complaining of back pain that turned out to be kidney issues."

My right arm is a classic case of repetitive strain injury and in my feet, the trouble started during pregnancy.

Dr Garbett says everyone should see a chiropractor every month or so for an MOT. I'd prefer not to pay for ongoing treatment, but I'm starting to suspect I can't afford not to.

ANDREW CROWLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH