

Healthcare technology has advanced dramatically over the years. The area with arguably the most advancement is in diagnostic technology, especially imaging. We are able to see things in the body with MRI, CAT scan and ultrasound technologies that we could never see with traditional x-rays.

Due to these advances and our reliance on them, many doctors have lost the more traditional skills that were the diagnostic mainstays of the past. These included the use of palpation, or touch to feel the subtle changes in body tissues that would mark the location of a disease process.

Skilled touch is still the most important diagnostic tool used by chiropractors. I remember when I was in school, some of my friends and I would try to develop this skill. One of us would place a hair under several pages of a phone book and then the others would attempt to locate the hair by lightly passing our fingers over the page. Over time we were able to add more and more pages. I don't remember how many pages each of us was eventually able to feel the hair through, but our skills definitely improved.

Recently a study was done to measure this ability. The tactile ability of three groups was measured and compared. One group was made of average people. A second group was composed of chiropractic students. The third group was practicing chiropractors. In the study a thin wire was placed under pages of paper and the average number of pages through which each group could locate the wire was recorded.

The results were quite interesting. The first group of people could feel the wire through nine pages on average. The chiropractic students could feel the wire through eighteen to twenty pages. The practicing chiropractors could locate the wire through thirty pages of paper. This demonstrates that not only do chiropractors have a much keener sense of touch than most people, but that this skill is something that can be developed over time.

I frequently have patients ask how I know where the problem is just by touching their spines. It is this sense of touch that allows me to do so. Technology is important and useful, but there is nothing more valuable than just being able to touch someone and know what is wrong and what needs to be done to help.

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