

The Art of Physiatry

Completing the Big Picture

By Charles W. Vokac, MD



Physicians at West End Orthopaedic Clinic always work to obtain a diagnosis and plan of treatment as efficiently as possible. This efficacy promotes rapid pain relief and a quick return to function. One of the key players in making these outcomes possible is the physiatrist.

Physiatrists specialize in physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R). This specialty was established more than 50 years ago, and now approximately 6,000 physicians practice in this multidisciplinary field.

To become board certified, a physiatrist must complete four years of accredited medical school training and four years of post-doctoral residency training and then pass a written and oral examination administered by the American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

Physiatrists are skilled in diagnosing and managing a variety of musculoskeletal, orthopaedic, and neurologic conditions. These physicians specialize in numerous areas within the PM&R field, including interventional spine care, chronic pain, musculoskeletal and orthopaedic injury, electrodiagnostic medicine, sports medicine, as well as spinal cord and brain injury. Many physiatrists choose to specialize in back pain and spine medicine because these are prevalent conditions in the general population.

Dealing with Pain

Rather than masking the problem long term with pain medication or procedures designed simply to block the pain, West End Orthopaedic Clinic focuses on obtaining a definitive diagnosis and developing a patient-specific treatment plan. Therefore, the physiatrist's role is to assist surgeons in making a thorough diagnosis as efficiently as possible.

A physiatrist performs a variety of diagnostic and therapeutic interventional spinal injection procedures. These include epidural steroid injections, facet joint injections, and sacroiliac joint injections. To ensure accuracy and safety, these injections are performed under fluoroscopic (x-ray) guidance at our state-of-the-art outpatient surgery center.

West End uses these procedures as part of a treatment plan to reduce pain associated with some common spine disorders. For example, the pain from a disk herniation may never return after an epidural steroid injection.

Conversely, much confusion surrounds this procedure and the reasons for performing it. The procedure can provide vital diagnostic information. Since inflammation tends to respond to steroids, a good response to an epidural steroid injection suggests that one of the spinal nerves suffers from inflammation.

This procedure can target one nerve at a time, making it an excellent way to determine which nerve is involved. This information helps immensely when planning treatment.

Accurate Diagnosis

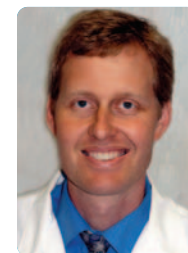
A physiatrist is also trained and certified to perform electrodiagnostic studies (EMG/NCS) that aid in diagnosing and prognosticating neurologic disease processes and nerve-related injuries of the spine and limbs. Again, this test is used to diagnose common problems efficiently. In fact, in some cases, an EMG/NCS is the only study that can reliably make the diagnosis.

There are two parts to this study. The first is the nerve conduction study (NCS). This involves delivering an electrical impulse to the affected extremity. The impulse travels through the skin and reaches the involved nerve. An electrode on the skin surface then records it. The most commonly made diagnosis resulting from NCS is carpal tunnel syndrome. This technique is also used to diagnose other conditions involving compressed nerves in the upper or lower extremities.

The second portion of EMG/NCS is electromyography, or EMG. In this procedure, a small needle-like electrode the size of an acupuncture needle is inserted into one or more of the muscles. This electrode records electrical activity within the muscle, which is useful for identifying the actual nerve root involved in a radiculopathy — a term describing nerve compression in the neck or back.

Team Approach

At West End Orthopaedic Clinic, physiatrists assist the surgeon in making a diagnosis. The more quickly and efficiently this is done, the shorter the pain duration and loss of function for patients. When a patient is referred to the group's physiatrist, rest assured he or she will make every effort to expedite the diagnosis and formulate an appropriate treatment plan. 🤝



Charles W. Vokac, MD, received his medical degree and completed his residency at Medical College of Virginia. He is board certified in physical medicine and rehabilitation. Dr. Vokac specializes in therapeutic spinal injections and nerve conduction studies.