

February 4, 1994

HUGH DOWNS, ABC News: Good evening. I'm Hugh Downs.

BARBARA WALTERS, ABC News: And I'm Barbara Walters and this is 20/20.

ANNOUNCER: From ABC News, around the world and into your home, the stories that touch your life, with Hugh Downs and Barbara Walters — this is 20/20.

Tonight, chiropractors — some are treating children for almost everything. Lots of parents trust them.,

MOTHER: He hasn't had an ear infection since.

ANNOUNCER: But there's another side. Our hidden cameras checked out many chiropractors. What till you see what we found: bizarre treatments, conflicting advice, doctors who test the mother when the child is the patient—

CHIROPRACTOR: What we're doing right now is I'm testing her muscles for him.

ANNOUNCER: —this child paralyzed after visiting the chiropractor. They use their techniques on babies' bones. Is this good science or just good business? If you care about your children, you can't afford to miss John Stossel's eye-opening investigation, "Handle With Care."

And Erik and Lyle Menendez — they killed their parents in cold blood, but these jurors say they understood why.

Handle With Care

HUGH DOWNS: We begin with an investigation that is so controversial it's already brought us an avalanche of letters, many of them warning us not to air this report. Why? Well, that's a good question to ask yourself as our hidden-camera investigation unfolds.

Who do you turn to for your child's medical care? Now, for most parents, it's their pediatrician, but some people have found an alternative, one that is raising serious concerns.

BARBARA WALTERS: Well, we're talking about chiropractors. You probably associate them with adults, but some chiropractors are now claiming they can deal with a wide range of children's illnesses, from ear infections to asthma, without medication, and million of parents believe it. What could be wrong with that? Tonight, John Stossel investigates their techniques and the results. Are parents being manipulated by some chiropractors? Is this the way to treat your children?

LARRY WEBSTER, D.C.: Is that okay? Did we do good? Okay, Craig, you're ready.

JOHN STOSSEL, ABC News: *[voice-over]* Dr. Larry Webster of Atlanta is the image of the kindly family doctor. His waiting room is filled with kids and parents who firmly believe Dr. Webster is their road to good health.

Dr. WEBSTER: Well, that means that probably they seek me out first for a problem.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* But Webster is not a family doctor in the usual sense. He's not a pediatrician or even an M.D. He's a chiropractor, one of many who now say, "We can do more that just treat backs. Chiropractic can help your whole body and your children's bodies, too." Webster's treatment — you're seeing it here — focuses on making an adjustment in the child's spine. He just pushes on the bones. This, he says, gets rid of something called vertebral subluxations — bones out of alignment in the spine that chiropractors claim press on nerves. Getting rid of these subluxations, he says, restores the child's nerve supply and allows messages to flow freely from the brain. This is supposed to allow the body to heal itself.

[interviewing] Did you make an adjustment, then?

Dr. WEBSTER: Yes, I did.

STOSSEL: So that little thing, that was it?

Dr. WEBSTER: That was it.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* The appointment costs about \$25 and lasts just minutes, but Dr. Webster's customers are very satisfied. He and other chiropractors we watched have wonderful bedside manner. Dr. Webster plays with the kids and takes lots of time to explain things. Above all, his treatments are unthreatening — no shots, no antibiotics, no vaccinations ever. It's all natural healing, say many chiropractors, and by treating vertebral subluxations, this natural healing can prevent ear infections, asthma, bedwetting, some say even cancer.

1st MOTHER: I think it's amazing myself. I really do.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* This mother says Webster helped her autistic child.

1st MOTHER: He wouldn't sit still. He wouldn't sit still, period. I mean, he would tear the things off the wall, he was just— and now, you know, he'll sit in class, you know, and his teachers say, "Well, he sits in class."

Dr. WEBSTER: Probably my dramatic has been the kid from Sao Paulo, Brazil.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* That child, he says, was deaf when he first saw him.

Dr. WEBSTER: We adjusted him on Saturday, checked again Saturday afternoon, checked him Saturday afternoon, adjust him again. Sunday morning they told me the child was doing this. The child was having sounds penetrating for the first time and did not know what they were. And now the child's hearing normally.

STOSSEL: Can I talk to these families?

Dr. WEBSTER: Well, if you got the— Sao Paulo, Brazil, I don't know.

STOSSEL: We can call Brazil.

Dr. WEBSTER: Sure, okay, and that's no problem.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* But later, when we asked him for the number, he said he couldn't find it. All this makes me more skeptical, but his patients believe. For many, Webster's the only doctor they see.

[interviewing] Do you go to a pediatrician, too?

2nd MOTHER: I don't go to a pediatrician.

STOSSEL: He does everything?

2nd MOTHER: He does everything.

STOSSEL: But your son then gets no vaccinations?

2nd MOTHER: Not at all.

STOSSEL: No antibiotics ever?

2nd MOTHER: Not needed.

3rd MOTHER: I said, "Chiropractor for an ear infection?"

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* This mother was skeptical at first.

3rd MOTHER: I really was kind of leery when he did the little thing that he does to his ears and he hasn't had an ear infection since.

Dr. MURRAY KATZ, Director Tiny Tots Clinic: It's all nonsense and scare tactics.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* Dr. Murray Katz of Quebec is director of one of North America's biggest pediatric medical centers.

[interviewing] If this is such nonsense, why do patients get better?

Dr. KATZ: Patients don't get better. People believe they're getting better. We know that ear infections can go away in two days. We know an asthma attack can stop acutely. We know that bedwetting—eventually people outgrow it.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* Katz is just one of many medical doctors skeptical of chiropractic, but Katz is unusual in that he's taken the time to really study it. He's visited chiropractic colleges, sat in on courses. He even joined the Chiropractic Pediatric Association, which is headed by Dr. Webster. Katz's and other M.D.'s conclusion: yes,

spinal manipulation, like the treatment you're seeing here, can be useful in relieving some lower back pain and there are studies in medical journals to support this. But as for relieving other symptoms and treating children, Katz and others say it's nonsense.

Dr. KATZ: There are hundreds of millions of dollars being spent to treat 15 or 20 million children a year for subluxations which none of them have.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* Dr. Webster's been called the grandfather of chiropractic pediatrics, but today it's a hot business and lots of chiropractors are doing what Webster does. Today there are companies that teach chiropractors how to build their practice, make a million in 24 months. I guess then you can buy this boat. Another tells you how to treat patients for a lifetime. A hundred dollars buys you a tape that'll convince parents to bring their kids in. One trick is to offer free steak dinners to people who'll listen to your pitch. And the children get coloring books showing the joys of adjustment. Even the dog wants one.

Many pediatric chiropractors were inspired by the "baby adjusters," Palmer and Jennifer Peet. They run a business teaching others how to open a practice, how to promote it with things like free t-shirts. And they teach courses for chiropractors, talking about things like ear infections, colds, asthma. And they know their techniques worked. They've helped thousands of children.

PALMER PEET, D.C.: They come in with a fever. We adjust them. The child goes to bed and they get up the next morning and it's as if there was never anything wrong with them. We've had case after case.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* The Peets' ideas are quoted in chiropractic manuals.

[interviewing] "Chiropractic works and medical procedures usually fail."

JENNIFER PEET, D.C.: In some cases that's true, and I don't think that you will get people to argue with that too much.

STOSSEL: "Usually fail"?

Dr. PALMER PEET: From the histories of literally thousands of children that we've taken when we've checked them in our office, many of them have come to us as medical failures.

STOSSEL: And you can help these children more than the conventional doctor could?

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: If they have a vertebral subluxation, I'm the only kind of doctor that can help them.

STOSSEL: And how many people have subluxations?

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: About 95 percent of children have vertebral subluxations.

STOSSEL: They say, "Ninety-five percent of children have them." They just— they don't?

Dr. KATZ: They don't. They have an ulterior motive for saying it. It's a growth industry. In order to find something to treat, they must find everybody's little bones out of place, starting right after birth.

STOSSEL: You doctors are just protecting your turf so you can make

more money.

Dr. KATZ: It's not a fight between doctors and chiropractors. It's a fight between science and superstition. It's a fight between science and a belief system.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* The pediatric chiropractors say they have science behind them, the science of subluxations. This is the crux of the dispute. Many medical doctors say what the chiropractors call subluxations don't even exist, that everyone has tiny variations in their spines and these have no effect on our health. The doctors also say that if you show chiropractors the same X-rays, they can't even agree on where the subluxations are. Chiropractors like the Peets say research shows they can pick out the same subluxations.

[interviewing] You can pick up subluxations on these X-rays?

Dr. PALMER PEET: Absolutely.

STOSSEL: Really?

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: And it's point 97 percent. That's very high.

STOSSEL: Well, let me ask you to do one, then, or do a few.

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: I can't. I don't have a viewbox.

Dr. PALMER PEET: Yeah, we don't have the equipment.

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: Sorry, we're not set up yet.

Dr. PALMER PEET: Also, we don't have the time, 'cause we have to—

STOSSEL: Well, if we leave them with you or—

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: Well, it would depend on what kind of X-rays they were. Let me have a look at them.

Dr. PALMER PEET: The quality of the X-rays.

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: The quality of the X-ray and— this isn't a very good X-ray. Who took these? And that one, you can't analyze that.

STOSSEL: If you can't read these X-rays, can we take some of your X-rays and take them to other chiropractors and see if they see the same thing?

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: Yes.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* But when we later tried to do that experiment, the Peets wouldn't give us the X-rays. They said we were running a circus.

We thought we'd learn more about this hot new business by running a real-life test. Blake has recurring ear infections. His pediatrician told his mother, Laurie, that the ear infections can be treated with antibiotics and eventually Blake will outgrow them. At our request, Laurie then took Blake to nine chiropractors. A 20/20 cameraman accompanied her, saying he was a friend. The "friend" carried a hidden camera.

If pediatric chiropractic is a science, you'd think that the chiropractors would agree on what's wrong with Blake, or perhaps they'd agree with the pediatrician and say Blake, or perhaps they'd agree with the pediatrician and say Blake is healthy and needs no treatment. Did they? No. Every chiropractor found a problem and, for the most part, not the same problem. The first one says—

1st CHIROPRACTOR: Blake has a misalignment between the

we asked these chiropractors why all the different diagnoses, some said leg lengths change. Some said they weren't varying diagnoses, just different techniques.

8th CHIROPRACTOR: Stay away from corn, cow's milk and white flour.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* When we confronted this chiropractor, he said although he had talked about food, his main diagnosis was a subluxation in the top vertebra. Chiropractor James Bowman said Kodi didn't even have an ear problem. Instead, he said he has a disturbance in his nervous system.

JAMES BOWMAN, D.C.: The cause of that seems to be scoliosis, which is—

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* Scoliosis is a frightening diagnosis. It can be grossly deforming.

[interviewing] This is very persuasive. His spine is curved. If I were his mother, I'd worry.

Dr. KATZ: Scoliosis is not any little curve in the spine, and it's not a condition which we see in that age group. It's almost unheard of. We've never seen a case— I think I've seen one case in 20 years.

STOSSEL: His doctor says your diagnosis is ridiculous.

Dr. BOWMAN: Well, you know, if he's not familiar with chiropractic, it would sound absurd, certainly.

STOSSEL: And the radiologist, too, says this is totally normal.

Dr. BOWMAN: I would disagree.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* Of course, if you listen to what the Peets say, most children don't have normal spines. They have "subluxations."

[interviewing] "Subluxations, if left undetected and uncorrected, are life-threatening"?

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: They certainly are.

Dr. PALMER PEET: They certainly are.

STOSSEL: Someone might just drop dead if they're not treated?

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: That's correct.

Dr. PALMER PEET: That's correct.

STOSSEL: "Now is the time to tell your patients that subluxations are slowly killing their children."

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: That's true.

Dr. PALMER PEET: That's true.

STOSSEL: You're scaring people for money.

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: Oh, no. Sometimes we don't even charge patients.

STOSSEL: But you're running a business, telling people to do more with kids. You're getting paid by other chiropractors for help in starting a business.

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: Is it scary for the cancer foundation to go out and warn women about having mammograms? That's not a scare tactic. That's an educational tactic. What parent wouldn't want their child to be able to have that kind of health care?

STOSSEL: A parent who thought you were quacks.

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: Well, doctors of chiropractic attend

chiropractic college for as long as medical doctors go to school.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* Yet even some chiropractors are critical. The biggest chiropractic association says there's no evidence that subluxations are life-threatening and that comments like that are irresponsible. On the other hand, the association does claim they've had lots of success treating kids, and they say children with ear infections and other conditions should be evaluated by chiropractors. The association and other chiropractors we talked to said children should also be seen by a pediatrician. Some chiropractors were still more critical.

CHARLES DUVAL, National Association for Chiropractic Medicine: They are making all the chiropractic physicians, even the scientifically-oriented ones that are trying to do a good job, look like absolute quacks.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* Chuck Duval heads the National Association for Chiropractic Medicine, which believes chiropractors should stick to trying to relieve back pain in adults.

[interviewing] Is there a lot of money in this?

Mr. DUVAL: Oh, there is so much money being ripped off. They want the patient to start from the day they're born on, forever.

Dr. PALMER PEET: I'd say maybe the average patient here is 50, 60 times, but over a period of time, and again, that's very individual.

STOSSEL: Is that covered by insurance?

Dr. PALMER PEET: Yes. Yes.

STOSSEL: *[voice-over]* You might be surprised to learn who's paying for all this. You are.

[interviewing] So the government pays for these treatments?

Dr. JENNIFER PEET: That's correct.

Dr. PALMER PEET: Oh, absolutely and has for years. Medicaid and Medicare in most states cover for chiropractic and it's not limited to the treatment of back pain.

Mr. DUVAL: There is no basis—

STOSSEL: But they say they'll make the body work right so it can heal itself and prevent itself from getting sick.

Mr. DUVAL: It's a wonderful idea, but it's not ever been proven.

STOSSEL: Might be true?

Mr. DUVAL: Might be true, and we might go downstairs and have lunch with Elvis.

STOSSEL: So are you saying that they're making it up just to make money?

Mr. DUVAL: Yeah, absolutely.

STOSSEL: Now, I don't agree with that. From the people I met, I think they genuinely believe that they're doing the right thing.

Downs: And they're exercised about it, 'cause the mail and faxes are coming in by the tons—

STOSSEL: Yeah, it's phenomenal and—

Downs: —even before it's on the air. John, I have to ask you, though — this business of a medium, this secondhand therapy like pulling the mother's leg instead of the child's. Is that conventional treatment in chiropractic or is that something oddball?

STOSSEL: No, that's something that the main chiropractic association said was absolute nonsense. Very few believe in that, but it's being taught at seminars and practiced around the country.

DOWNS: Do you think there ought to be laws curtailing that kind of activity?

STOSSEL: Well, I mean, I think in a free country people should have the right to seek out alternative medicine. I think that— and it might work. Anything is possible. I'm upset that we pay for it. The government and our insurance, we pay for their experimental treatment.

DOWNS: That was a surprise to me when you first came up with that. Fascinating piece. Thank you, John.

STOSSEL: Thanks.

WALTERS: Look at all this mail sent in advance.

DOWNS: You got to read all that now.

STOSSEL: Before they've seen the piece.

WALTERS: Before they've seen it. We don't get that kind of mail. Maybe we're lucky. Next, 12 angry men and women, jurors in the Menendez trial. If you wondered why it was a hung jury, why they couldn't convict the brothers who killed their parents, Tom Jarriel has the answer — his exclusive interview with a group of women jurors — and you'll find it hard to believe what went on during those deliberations. Next.

[Commercial break]