

# OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE:

## *A Distinctive Branch of Mainstream Medical Care*

Should the physician focus on the patient or the patient's disease? This debate has raged from the beginnings of medical history when the Hippocratic philosophy centered on the patient and the rival Conidian philosophy focused on the disease.

Osteopathic medicine embraces the Hippocratic approach. Currently, some 38,000 osteopathic physicians and surgeons offer the public a different dimension in medical care.

What is the osteopathic medical philosophy?

In brief, D.O.s, or Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine, are fully-licensed and recognized physicians and surgeons who stress the unity of all body systems. They also emphasize the musculoskeletal system, holistic medicine and proper nutrition and environmental factors. They bring a hands-on approach to medicine and view manipulation or palpation as an aid to the diagnosis and treatment of various illnesses.

Osteopathic medicine was founded on the Kansas frontier in 1874. Dr. Andrew Taylor Still was an individualistic and strong-willed M.D. who was dissatisfied with the ineffectiveness of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century medicine. HE decried the rudimentary drugs and surgery of the day and saw many people, including his own three children, die from serious diseases. Concepts such as anesthesia, sterile surgery, antiseptics, antibiotics and x-rays were not imagined in the 1870's.

In response, Dr. Still founded a philosophy of medicine that harkened back to Hippocrates, with its central focus on the body unity. He identified the musculoskeletal system as a key element of health, a principal that is now becoming better understood. He recognized the body's capability to heal. He stressed preventative medicine, eating properly and keeping fit which mainstream America wholeheartedly embraced in the 1970's.

He identified palpation and the human touch as vital to gaining patient confidence and providing effective medical care. And he stressed manipulation as a less-intrusive form of diagnosis and treatment. Currently, many Americans seek procedures and therapies that are less-invasive and less likely to escalate cost or engender side effects.

A number of studies have shown that osteopathic manipulation is the most cost-effective type of health care.

D.O.s offer mainstream medical care...but mainstream medical care with a difference. That's the focus of this paper.

**OSTEOPATHIC CONCEPT:** *The human body is a unified organism.*

Osteopathic physicians emphasize the all body systems, including the musculoskeletal system, operate in unison—and disturbance in one system can alter the functions of other systems. By recognizing the close relationship between body structure and organic functioning, the D.O. has a broader base for treating the whole patient.

**PRACTICE APPLICATION:** *D.O.s follow a holistic, common-sense approach to health care delivery that view each patient in his or her entirety.*

Osteopathic physicians not only recognize the interdependence of all parts of that complex machine—the human body—but also consider the patient's mental and emotional status. In addition, the D.O. pays attention to the relationship of the patient to his or her home environment, job, and other factors that affect health.

For example, the surgical removal of a diseased gallbladder is a valuable and acceptable practice of osteopathic physicians. However,

---

D.O.s believe that medicine must be more than an attempt to repair, relieve or remove the end-products of disease processes. The gallbladder does not malfunction independently; its nerve and blood supply and the chemical balance of body fluids also may be implicated. Besides arresting and acute episode of illness, the D.O.'s underlying concern is to return the patient to a state of optimum health by dealing directly with both the internal and external conditions that caused the disease in the first place.

The holistic tradition of osteopathic medicine is reflected in the fact that 66% of many graduating D.O.s enter primary care, where they view the patient as a total entity. Many of today's osteopathic physicians practice in smaller towns and rural areas—where the need for primary health care is greatest. Even when a D.O. becomes a specialist, such as a surgeon, cardiologist, anesthesiologist, or psychiatrist, he or she still sees each patient as a whole and stresses that illness can have its origin in any part of the body.

**OSTEOPATHIC CONCEPT:** *The body's neuro-musculoskeletal system is central to the patient's well-being.*

This system includes the bones, muscles, tendons, tissues, and nervous system – about 60 percent of the body mass. The musculoskeletal framework, D.O.s point out, is far more than an anatomical rack on which the other organs are hung. It works in concert with all other organs. It responds –properly or improperly—every time a breath is drawn or any other body movement occurs. Besides being prone to mechanical disorders, the musculoskeletal system reflects many internal illnesses and may aggravate or accelerate the process of disease in the circulatory, lymphatic, nervous and other body systems.

**PRACTICE APPLICATIONS:** *Osteopathic manipulation of the neuro-musculoskeletal system is a viable and proven technique for many hands-on diagnosis and treatments. Often, it can*

*provide an alternative to more intrusive therapies involving drugs and/or surgery.*

Osteopathic physicians utilize all of the recognized procedures and modern technologies for prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease, including drugs, radiation and surgery. But the D.O. also has another pair of tools that enable him or her to accurately diagnose areas of dysfunction and treat them effectively. These tools are his or her hands.

Manipulation brings an added dimension to the osteopathic physician's diagnostic and therapeutic armamentarium. Sometimes it is in the form of palpation (touch) as a diagnostic procedure to detect soft tissue changes or structural asymmetries; other times it's in the form of corrective thrust forces to relieve dysfunction or restrictions of motion in joints. Because musculoskeletal dysfunction can mimic other disease syndromes, osteopathic manipulations is an important component in differential diagnosis, as well as a means of correcting structural problems.

It has been well-documented that diseases of specific organs can produce pain in distant parts of the body. Stomach ulcers consistently cause areas of spinal pain and irritation just below the shoulders in the back. The radiation of pain to the loin from a diseased kidneys is another typical example, as is the reflection of pain and disability to the left shoulder following heart disease. In diagnosis such disease, D.O.s recognize that symptoms can be produced without actual disorder in the organs from which pain has been referred.

Conversely, disturbances affecting the musculoskeletal system can cause symptoms that simulate other illnesses. Among the most common causes of recurrent headaches, for example, are disorders of the cervical (upper) portion of the spinal column. Consequently, properly applied manipulative treatment, particularly directed to the neck and head, often affords relief of headache symptoms when all other remedies have failed.

---

Basic descriptions of some specific manipulative techniques are presented.

**OSTEOPATHIC CONCEPT:** *The body has a natural tendency toward health, as well as the capacity to resist disease and to heal itself.*

The body's own healing power, *vis mediatrix naturae*, is a main principle of osteopathic medicine and a basic condition of all diagnosis and treatment. Therefore, osteopathic practice is designed to support, stimulate and, in some instances, initiate the body's trend toward health.

**PRACTICE APPLICATION:** *In addition to treating specific health problems, the D.O.'s goal is to help every patient function at his or her highest level of efficiency. There is a fundamental concern with preventative medicine, proper nutrition and keeping a patient fit.*

D.O.s pioneered the concept "wellness" over 100 years ago. In today's terms, personal health risks – such as smoking, high blood pressure, excessive cholesterol levels, stress and other lifestyle factors – are evaluated for each individual. In coordination with appropriate medical treatments, the osteopathic physician acts as a teacher and guide to help patients take more responsibility for their own well-being and change unhealthy patterns.

Sports medicine also is a natural outgrowth of osteopathic practice, which focuses on the musculoskeletal system, manipulation, diet, exercise and fitness. Many professional sports team physicians, Olympic physicians and personal sports medicine physicians are D.O.s.

**OSTEOPATHIC CONCEPT:** *The osteopathic profession cooperates with all other branches of medical science. However, it maintains its professional independence in order to sustain and develop osteopathic medicine as a unique and comprehensive system of health care.*

**PRACTICE APPLICATIONS:** *Osteopathic medicine plays a distinctive role in the nation's health care delivery system.*

D.O.s hold the same unlimited practice rights as M.D.s in all 50 states; they serve as commissioned officers in the medical corps of all armed forces, plus the Veterans Administration and Public Health Service. And they are recognized by the A.M.A. as full-practice physicians.

D.O.s admit and treat patients in both osteopathic and allopathic (M.D.) hospitals and clinics. Many D.O.s and M.D.s work as colleagues in a range of medical settings, and patient referrals between the two professions are common. Participation in federal Medicare and Medicaid programs are also on an equal basis.

Although osteopathic medicine represents only 12% of the U.S. physician population, it is a fast-growing segment of the health-care field. The number of osteopathic medical colleges has grown to 17 at present.

By combining unique osteopathic principles with traditional diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, D.O.s offer a balanced system of health care to prevent and cure disease.

By treating the whole person, not just the disease, the D.O. actively seeks to improve the quality of life of each patient.

If you would like further information, please contact:

Colorado Society of Osteopathic Medicine  
600 S. Cherry St., Suite 510  
Denver, CO 80246  
303-322-1752  
[www.coloradodo.org](http://www.coloradodo.org)

or

Public Relations Department  
American Osteopathic Association  
142. E. Ontario Street  
Chicago, Illinois, 60611  
[www.am-osto-assn.org](http://www.am-osto-assn.org)

---

## An Overview of Osteopathic Manipulation Techniques

The spectrum of osteopathic manipulation techniques focuses on the principle that body structure and function are dependent on one another. When structure is altered via the musculoskeletal system, abnormalities occur in other body systems. This, in turn, can produce restriction of motion, tenderness, tissue changes and asymmetry.

Following are some of the manipulation procedures most commonly used by osteopathic physicians to diagnose and treat somatic dysfunctions.

**Hands-On Contact:** The value of placing of hands on a patient is universally acknowledged by health professionals. This essential component of the doctor-patient relationship has a great deal to do with the patient's well-being, whether he or she suffers from a cold or a terminal disease. When the D.O. examines a patient by auscultation of the chest or palpation of the abdomen or spine, the treatment already has begun.

**Soft-Tissue Technique:** This procedure is commonly applied to the musculature surrounding the spine, and consists of rhythmic linear stretching, deep pressure and traction. Its purpose is to move tissue fluids (edema) and to relax hypertonic muscles and myofascial (fibrous tissue) layers associated with somatic dysfunction.

**Lymphatic Technique:** This method promotes circulation of the lymphatic fluids by pumping action and can be used to relieve upper and lower respiratory infections and edema in other areas of the body. There are other lymphatic techniques.

**Thrust Technique:** In this form of manipulation, the physician applies a high-velocity/low-amplitude thrust to restore motion to a joint after accordingly diagnosing the restriction. With such a technique, the joint regains its normal range of motion and interrupts abnormal neural reflexes. The procedure reduces and/or completely nullifies the signs of tissue changes, asymmetry, restriction of motion and tenderness associated with somatic dysfunction.

**Counterstrain:** With the counterstrain technique, the patient is moved passively away from the restricted motion barrier, in three planes of motion, searching for the position of greatest comfort. At this point, passive, asymptomatic strain is induced, and the position is held for 90 seconds. Relief of abnormal nerve impulses creating muscle tension is achieved.

**Functional Technique:** This is an indirect technique performed with constant palpatory control by the physician. It is gentle and effective in realigning body parts.

**Craniosacral Manipulation:** A very subtle and profound type of treatment applied to all body parts, utilizing the potency of the primary respiratory mechanism, a very minute but powerful fluid fluctuation.

**Myofascial and Ligamentous Release:** A very gentle indirect or direct technique applied to myofascial and ligamentous structures utilizing the inherent forces within those structures.

Colorado Society of Osteopathic Medicine  
600 S. Cherry St., Suite 510  
Denver, Co 80246  
303-322-1752 [www.coloradodo.org](http://www.coloradodo.org)