

OSTEOPATHY AND CHIROPRACTIC

The back is the mysterious side of every body; you need two mirrors to see it comfortably. Yet it has attracted its fair share of attention. The prevalence of back pain has led to a variety of manipulative therapies with wide applications. Osteopathy and chiropractic are distinct but related drug-free treatments that concentrate primarily on dealing with disorders of the spine.

Manipulation has been used to heal disorders of the musculo-skeletal system in countless cultures throughout history, but these two well-known branches of alternative medicine were not born until the late nineteenth century. Within the established medical community they have met with ambivalence since they were thought to compete with traditional orthopedics and physiotherapy. Recognition and acceptance of the methods have grown, however, as more and more people find the treatments effective.

Techniques of osteopathy

Osteopathy was evolved by Dr. Andrew Taylor Still (1828–1917), a Missouri physician. As a doctor, Still was versed in the art of setting broken bones, but the new treatment he introduced was original, founded on 16 years of study. He opened the first College of Osteopathy in 1892, and within 20 years saw the practice recognized in every state in the Union.

The name osteopathy, from the Greek words for bone disease, is misleading since it is not connected with bone disease but with conditions arising from misuse of the bones and joints, and of the spine in particular. Still's central concept was what he called an osteopathic lesion, a structural abnormality that could cause functional or organic disease and pain.

A lesion might be a muscle in spasm or an irritated nerve, manifested as strain, pain, thickening of connective tissue, physical derangement, or local swelling. The spinal cord, housed in the spine, is the link between brain and body. Spinal nerves emerge from it between the vertebrae and are easily irritated, causing pain in the parts of the body they serve. The spinal cord also plays a key role in the functioning of the autonomic nervous system (the controller of automatic respiratory, digestive, circulatory, and similar functions), so that seemingly remote organs can suffer when the spine suffers.

Still proposed that disease would not develop if

the blood circulates freely. Therefore osteopathic lesions disturbing the system must be located and removed. This is the osteopath's work.

Recently acquired problems, such as a backache caused by awkward lifting, may be cured in one session. Longer-standing conditions, accompanied by tissue damage or structural adaptation by the muscles and ligaments usually require a series of treatments. It is recommended that you do not go to an osteopath for the treatment of a slipped disk (see pages 138–139). This condition is best dealt with by conventional medical treatment under the direction of an orthopedic specialist.

Techniques of chiropractic

Chiropractic is the most widely recognized form of alternative, drugless medicine in the world, with more than eight million Americans currently receiving treatment. Unlike osteopathy, which is confined to the treatment of mechanical disorders, chiropractic is concerned with a system of disease and its treatments have a wider scope.

Named for the Greek words meaning "treatment by manipulation," chiropractic was christened by a patient of David Daniel Palmer, who introduced the theory in 1895. Palmer differed from Still in emphasis and terminology more than in actual therapy. He discounted Still's notion of osteopathic lesions and referred instead to "subluxations"—slight displacements or deviations of bony parts, notably the vertebrae. Correcting such displacements by manipulation might eliminate a variety of symptoms, including back pains, headaches, and indigestion.

Compared with Still, Palmer placed greater importance on the nervous system and on the way mechanical disorders of the joints interfere with it. He proposed that mechanical dysfunction was best corrected by mechanical means.

Chiropractic diagnosis is similar to osteopathic but makes more regular use of X-rays and blood, urine, neurological, and orthopedic tests. Manipulative treatment in chiropractic uses a different type of leverage. Studies have shown that treatment by a trained, registered chiropractor is safe. It has proved indispensable for many people who suffer from back pain and is best suited to specific applications, such as rehabilitation and sports medicine. It should not be expected to cure advanced illnesses, such as severe arthritis, resulting from severe tissue damage.