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WHAT IS OSTEOPATHY?

Osteopathy is a “hands on” system of manual medicine.

It was founded by Andrew Taylor Still (1828-1917). His major realization upon the key to health and disease occurred in 1874 which laid the foundations for what later was to become Osteopathy. The first school was opened in Kirksville, Missouri, America, in the fall of 1892.

Osteopathy is founded upon the following 4 principles:

1. The body is a unit
2. Structure and function are interrelated
3. The body has self-healing and self regulating mechanisms
4. Treatment is based on an understanding of the first three principles

Body Unity:

The body is comprised of numerous structural components, all of which need to be functioning in harmony (unity) for health to fully manifest. These components include all of the anatomy of the body, as well as mind and spirit.

Health = harmony, ease, function, and a balanced relationship between all components of the whole (unity of function).

Note: Although “Osteo” means bones, this does not mean only the bones are assessed and treated. A.T.Still used the bones as a framework upon which to build a sound understanding of the whole human unit. Osteopathy is wholistic and naturalistic. It adds to the bony framework an understanding of interrelationship between ligaments, fascia, muscle, nerves, vessels and all other organ systems of the body including the emotional, mental and spiritual.

Osteopathy, from one perspective, is knowledge of anatomy applied to healing diseases.

Structure and function are interrelated:

Structure can affect function and function can affect structure.

As long as the components are functioning in harmony with their structure, the body is balanced and health is maintained.

Health within a component of the whole means structure and function are in balance both with itself and in its relationship with the whole (it is balanced or compensating optimally in response to stresses elsewhere).

Dis-ease/dys-function means an imbalance in the structure/function relationship of any component with itself (structure does not equal function) and with other healthy components of the whole (this is a clue to primary dysfunctions).

Components that are not functioning in harmony with their structures are identified and addressed in an effort to return the body to unity.

Thus Osteopathy assesses the reciprocal interrelationship between structure and function to determine what components of the whole need treatment.

Rather than purely treating tissues causing symptoms, an Osteopath seeks to identify key areas of dysfunction predisposing, maintaining or contributing in some way to the symptom picture. The natural recovery process will be slowed unless these components are addressed in treatment. Thus, an Osteopath assesses and treats internal *patterns* of dysfunction that are contributing to the overall symptom picture (cause to effect). The Osteopath also considers external components that may be contributing to the pattern of dysfunction, such as gravity, sport, work and environmental factors. In this way any internal and external components contributing to the problem can be included in the treatment plan and promote optimal recovery from illness or injury.

The Body has self-healing and self-regulating mechanisms:

In the absence of disease the body is self-regulating and maintains health. There is no self healing because everything is already healthy. With the onset of dysfunction the body will go into self-healing, regenerating and repair mode. It will send its healing energies/forces to the area in trouble and attempt to restore the balance in the shortest possible time frame. If it is unable to do this for whatever reason (i.e. mental, emotional and/or physical issues interfering with the inflow of health) the rest of the body will compensate in order to maintain overall, relative, equilibrium. Health is redistributed to areas that need it most in order to maintain the compensation pattern and to minimize stresses on any one area.

An imbalance in one area will therefore have far reaching effects on other areas of the body. Each tissue/area will respond to varying degrees depending on how each individual compensates. The body can cope with this adaptation without symptoms up to a point, beyond which the stressed tissues/areas get overloaded and function begins to break down and become dys-function. A person may accumulate many such dysfunctions over the course of a lifetime before his/her body gets to the point of "not coping". The body then begins to manifest symptoms in overstressed areas. Thus, it is easy to see that symptoms are merely the end effect of a long chain of compensations and adaptations in response (or reaction) to varying stresses over the course of a patient's life-time. Dealing with symptoms alone will not address these predisposing patterns, if present, and "at best" helps to restore a person to a point of balanced compensation in response to all the preceding imbalances. In other words, it takes the symptomatic tissue (or tissues) off overload and allows it (them) to "cope" once again.

This is especially the case in those with chronic health problems. A person walks into see a physician in an optimal state of balance for them, in that moment. An Osteopath, aware of this, takes an individualized approach to assessment and treatment. He, or she, tries to help the body reach an improved level of health by releasing any patterns contributing to and placing stress on the symptomatic area. By taking away the stresses, the area of symptoms get some relative rest. With the load off the tissues can do more than just "cope"; they can begin to self-heal (i.e. healthy nutrients, energies and forces can once again flow to and from the damaged area).

Because the self healing mechanisms within the body want to self heal but aren't allowed, because of the issues present impeding the natural healing process, a good physician will try to recognize and release these limiting factors and support the self healing mechanisms reconnect with and heal the damaged areas. Because the body does have self healing mechanisms (as discussed above), a good physician will also try to uncover where the body is also concentrating its healing forces in order to support the body to reestablish a balanced relationship of these areas with the damaged area/s and thus promote self-healing. By uncovering the pattern of im-balance (dis-ease or dys-function) and balance (ease or function – i.e. health), he/she then helps re-establish communication (as would a good lawyer or counselor between two or more disputing parties) in the relationship between unhealthy and healthy areas thus provides the awareness and treatment (to the best of his/her ability) necessary to resolve the difficulty.

The symptoms will disappear on their own (within a more natural time frame) providing there are no contributing factors interfering with the natural healing process.

Example: A pelvic imbalance together with gravity and running may predispose a person to a knee, ankle or foot problem by placing extra weight bearing and load through the involved region. It all depends on where the imbalanced weight bearing forces are passing through in the individual concerned. This pelvic imbalance can even set up an acute sprain by contributing to the patient being in the wrong position prior to any activity. Furthermore, in the case of an acute ankle sprain; a pelvic or diaphragmatic dysfunction may obstruct fluid flow to and drainage from the lower extremity and thus slow recovery. It is easy to see how treating the pelvic imbalance in this case could help remove impediments to the healing process and thus promote recovery.

Treatment:

Treatment involves a sound understanding of principles 1 – 3 above. From the above discussion you can see that Osteopathy defined more as a particular way a looking at health and disease rather than by any particular treatment technique. The guiding philosophy is common to all Osteopaths and allows the Osteopath to assess and treat the patient individually by taking into account each individual's unique pattern of dysfunction.

The treatment techniques themselves, however, will vary depending on the interests, style and personal viewpoint of any particular Osteopath as well as the need of the tissues. These include a wide range of techniques such as: soft tissue massage, manipulation, articulation, lymphatic drainage, muscle energy technique, fascial unwinding, functional technique, strain-counterstrain, cranio-sacral therapy, bio-energetic osteopathy, visceral techniques, stretching, self awareness and rehabilitation advice and other complimentary approaches.

BIO-DYNAMIC/ENERGETIC OSTEOPATHY

Biodynamic Osteopathy is a gentle therapy where the practitioner gently places his/her hands on your body and adds to his/her traditional postural assessment an assessment of the whole being using the inner life rhythms as a diagnostic tool. This enables the practitioner to assess the inner health and function of all organs and tissues of the body and also to gain an understanding of how other levels of being (energetic, emotional, mental and spiritual) are influencing the health and wellbeing of the individual assessed.

Outer postural assessment methods should still be used but assessing the inner life rhythms and energies enhances a practitioner's awareness of the causes and contributing factors behind the outer symptomatic effects. This then allows the potential for the practitioner to treat on a much deeper level to enhance a patient's overall health and wellbeing.

To treat, the practitioner supports the patient's inner self healing mechanisms by working with inner life rhythms, energies and forces to help bring the whole being of the patient back into balance. Being more in balance, stress/load is taken off the symptomatic areas allowing them to heal more effectively and efficiently.

Together with traditional methods of treatment such as manipulation, articulation and soft tissue therapy (which can still be used where appropriate), biodynamic Osteopathy helps to enhance long term health in patients with a wide variety of health issues.

For more information:

Please contact your local Osteopath or the Australian Osteopathic Association.