

## **Osteopathic Medicine: A.T. Still reaches The Last Frontier**

### *Pipeline to Alaskan Osteopathy*

It's hard to say when and where I all found myself mesmerized, canonized or epiphasized to the basic and profound simplicity and sensibility of Osteopathic Medicine. Perhaps it occurred the first time I saw that life size portrait of Dr. A.T. Still M.D., D.O. holding and analyzing that femoral bone all the while with a look by which immeasurable numbers have attempted to interpolate with endless theories as to his true thoughts at that very moment.

It has been quite a journey to say the least. If one were to even take a fractionated glance at the colorful history of the Osteopathic Profession and likewise the Osteopathic Educational model I find myself astonished as to where we, the Osteopathic community originated from, how current views intertwine in an ever changing world of modern day medicine, and the future boundless with its vastness of opportunity throughout the arena of Osteopathic Medical Education.

That portrait of our beloved founder now hangs in the hearts and minds of all us who have been chosen to become disciples of the Osteopathic Doctrine. In addition to the ever presence in we who now serve Osteopathy, that photo now hangs in the hallways, byways and walkways of any number of the 21 Osteopathic Medical Schools across the Lower 48 states. It would be hard pressed to find any Osteopathic campus that has not enshrined Dr. Still in one way or some other, as a testament to his lasting legacy, a legacy that he forged long ago, a mission, a call to action with an ongoing charge to keep.

Can I assume that Dr. Still envisioned the Osteopathic philosophy to have national recognition and to be standing, as we are now, on the precipice of world wide acceptance? From that one room school in Kirksville, Missouri, the Osteopathic vision was born. With humble beginnings Dr. Still expressed hesitation as to whether or not Osteopathy was even a teachable subject. As historical expressions have revealed, it is a way of life, a thought process, a mindset, and an intangible force by which is intrinsically necessary to succeed in the world of osteopathy.

It is in this spirit of philosophical vision that a quickening inside myself came to fruition with the realization and an epiphany that the AT Still philosophy is alive, well and remains a calling. A calling not only in clinical, and educational practice, but also in the arena of an ongoing need to reach those that Osteopathy was most formidably established for...the rural community.

Having had numerous years to pause and now ponder on the origins of our respective paths to medical training there sadly proved to be a great loss as to why Osteopathic medicine, with its rural roots, has yet to reach one rural community in particular, my community of Fairbanks, ironically rural by all official definitions and arguably located in the most rural state among these United States-Alaska.

With a non-traditional and humblest of beginnings there appeared a deep kinship between myself, Dr. Still, Osteopathy and his philosophical vision. It was likewise from a one room cabin outside Clear, Alaska, that I drew my strength and desire to reach all those in need and spread the message of self resilience, self reliance, and a heal thyself

approach to my life. I too wanted to embrace my life as a whole to find and “manipulate” my surroundings to bring the message of Osteopathy to my community.

## **A Charge to Keep**

I think most of us who are physicians today can remember those days in undergrad thinking about the possibility of medical school. What classes do I need to take? What major is the best? Can I overcome a poor GPA? What do medical schools really look at? Do I have a chance? For the majority of medical students in the “Lower 48” the advising on campus was adequate, the answers to those daunting questions clear, and the plan for medical school admission easy to see. However, for students living in rural parts of the country, pre-med advising is far from adequate and the mere possibility of becoming a doctor a laughable dream. I found the latter to be especially true in my home state of Alaska. The Far North, a place of isolation, long winters, and villages accessible only by plane. No medical school exists there and all doctors are transplanted from somewhere else.

As I come closer to finishing residency, I reflect on my own journey to get to this point. From Anderson, Alaska, a town of 500 folks from everywhere nestled in the Tanana Valley, 100 miles from nowhere. My high school was close knit, all of us more like cousins than anything else. There were 10 of us in my graduating class, nine of whom became working professionals. I had a rude awakening during that transition to big town, college life. No longer was there a comfort zone, the classes so large, the subjects foreign and beyond the scope of my little school. I knew early that I wanted to be a physician but the path was unclear. My advisor told me you have to have a science degree. I plunged headfirst into the biological sciences only to face my first failing grade of many. I strived for that 3.8+; an impossible goal. My determination was solid but it seemed I was forever caught in that ugly spiral of retaking classes and my GPA being frozen in time like the Arctic tundra around me.

## **The Course Comes to Life**

So, in 2007, I was thinking about how things could have been different for me had I had better advising along this rocky road of mine. I think the essence of being an Osteopathic physician is trying to somehow return to your roots and use your knowledge to better the future. One of the things I always wanted to do was return to my undergraduate school and show up there knowing that the advising to students was likely close to what I received 18 years before. I decided it was time to put together my own advising workshop for Alaska students and try to make a difference for that one individual striving for a medical career, lost in the sea of academia with no real guidance. I contacted my past physics professor, bought an airplane ticket and headed home. Unsure of the audience I would have, I emailed the pre-med club to apprise them of my arrival, put up flyers around campus about my workshop, and came up with a presentation outline. As a secondary presentation, I was scheduled to speak with the ANSEP group (Alaska Native Science & Engineering Program) a system to try to

encourage Alaska Natives and American Indians to strive for professionalism beyond the bachelor's degree. I understand the hardships of trying to overcome a bush Alaskan high school education in the university setting. To want something more than that to most students there is beyond comprehension. My story touched a lot of people that day, not a sound could be heard in the room. I was told later that many students who had wanted to drop out didn't because I showed them that hardship could be overcome if you want it bad enough. For the remainder of the week I allowed any student to sign up for a one on one personal session with me to discuss goals, dreams, and analyze their grades, essays, and application status. The response to this opportunity was overwhelming and I was booked solid for 10 hours a day for 4 days straight. The hunger for good advising, where to start and how to gain acceptance to professional schools is seriously lacking in Alaska. Unless those of us who have traveled that road return to assist students on rural campuses I fear the shortage of doctors in Alaska will never be overturned. From my own experience many students are being unnecessarily defeated at the undergraduate level. Unbeknownst to them professors appointed as advisors may be lacking the necessary expertise to disseminate adequate knowledge regarding Pre-Medical requirements and may be unknowingly passing along false information. It is only after completing this workshop and speaking directly with premed students that I strongly feel this case to be true. The access to good pre-med advising appears to be a rift as large as the reality of moving 2000 miles to Seattle, the nearest medicine school. A financially draining and daunting task, unheard of to most students, but very much a reality to those who choose to live in the Far North.

## **Modern Day Medicine Men**

The response to my advising workshop last year was amazingly well received, enough so, I made it a point to plan a second workshop this year. As I was thinking about how I could do it differently I was discussing the fact that Alaska Native students really don't have many professional mentors and you definitely never see a Native or American Indian physician taking care of patients. How fantastic would it be to take a Native American physician with me this time? I didn't have to look very far for the answer. Within my residency program here in south Texas there are physicians of all races. One of my residents, an American Indian, has experienced many of the hardships similar to Alaska Native students. He grew up on the reservation and faces the stigma of being a physician in a world where underrepresented minorities are few and far between. He didn't have to think very hard about my offer to travel to Alaska to assist me in my quest to broaden the dreams of rural students there. We arrived in mid-November, 2008 in pitch black, snow on the ground, in -10F determined to make a difference in some student's life that week.

Our first order of business was to present to the pre-med club on campus. Our presentation focused on a general outline of how to maximize your application for medical school. The goal was to intentionally quash all those myths that were spoon fed to me so many years ago. Our one hour block quickly turned into a three hour question/answer session from "What classes do I take", to "How do I find out about what they ask on interviews?" We closed with a quick but thorough demonstration of osteopathic manipulation and the basic principles of Osteopathic Medicine. The students

were so excited to have real physicians giving real world advice and hope, they didn't want it to end and my goal of spreading the existence of osteopathic medicine was realized.

The next order of business was the presentation to the ANSEP meeting. Not only did a Native American physician speak to the group but one who rotated at Harvard, John's Hopkins, and the Cleveland Clinic. That one presentation opened the eyes of so many Native students that day to the possibility of being able to achieve something more. The idea that one can be a minority and be a professional is relatively new and one that the university setting in Alaska struggles to foster in this ethnic group. To honor your people, your family, and bring back to the community a sense of dignity and worth as a professional is what the new age of Native culture is striving towards. To move past the long standing subsistence only lifestyle and introduce modern day professions into Village life is the goal of many modern day native students. It's a powerful message to see one of your own people succeed in the medical profession and profess that, yes, it is possible if you want it badly enough. The Alaskan Native students flocked to us this year, eager to speak with the One who made it. We held individual sessions again for only one day this time and 12 hours later finally had to stop. I know we could have continued for a second day had time allowed. My goal of inspiring Alaskan students, especially Alaskan Native and Indian students to dream for something more was immensely successful, more than I could have ever hoped.

### **On the Horizon**

My goal for the workshop this and last year was to provide adequate advising for the pre-med club and to spread the word about the differences between allopathic and osteopathic education, admissions processes and what's important for your respective applications. The AOA has campaigned exhaustively to try and get more students to think about osteopathic medicine and create more family practice physicians especially in rural areas. How are students expected to go the DO route when they don't even know it exists? Alaska traditionally has been courted by the WWAMI program; a program designed to designate 20 admission slots at University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle. An amazing stride for Alaskan students in theory however my concerns arises, where do all the other students go when those slots are filled? WWAMI in itself has tried to fill the void to train local Alaskans since Alaska falls short 100 physicians statewide a year. The demand for physicians far outweighs the supply. It would behoove the Osteopathic colleges to attempt to fulfill Dr. Still's rural concept and assist its allopathic brethren to close the gap.

Further trips to Alaska are needed to expand the discussion campuswide regarding pre-professional advisory services. The University setting needs to better prepare and be positive about Alaska's students being able to successfully apply for health professional educations to become doctors of osteopathic or allopathic medicine as well as a variety of other health professional educations (i.e., pharmacy, dentistry, vet medicine, physical and occupational therapy). I know there are very few Alaska Native doctors in existence and Alaska has a huge shortage in general of physicians. I foresee future expansions of my workshop across more than one campus in Alaska or perhaps a teleconference among the

three major campuses. The ultimate goal would be to formulate an agreement between the Alaska university system and an Osteopathic School to hold positions for Alaskan residents in the hopes of someday providing much needed doctors in such a rural part of the country.

## **Palimpsests**

It's impossible to say what A.T. Still was thinking, pondering, or contemplating when that now forever famous image traveled through the photographic lens and became imprinted on a palimpsest casing. Did the photographer realize in that very moment he or she would have just participated in creating not only a physical, literal image but also a metaphorical and symbolic icon for all osteopaths to look to and find strength for decades and generations to come?

For we as Osteopathic Physicians are in many ways living breathing palimpsests of our ethnic, geographic, and racial backgrounds. Throughout our careers we have had our histories wiped away and replaced many times over, all the while with residual markings still shining through, these markings shaping our everyday experiences and decisions as we daily attempt to combat disease from all angles and from all fronts. Throughout our lives both personal and professional I have seen the positive results of appropriate and adequate guidance. These residual "markings" have and continue to aide me as I attempt to maneuver within this world called Osteopathic Medicine. Let us now look first to the past, glance or glare at Dr. Still, and allow his vision to remain. Allow what he started many years ago to continue in the hearts and minds of all who come across and in contact of Osteopathic Medicine. And let us also look to the future and find the "untapped" oases of vibrant willing enthusiastic participants to carry on the tradition set forth in 1892.

There has been insurmountable talk about the untapped "resources" of Alaska and what she as a land can give these United States and society as a whole. And I am of the same consortium who believes that Alaska possesses seemingly infinite untapped opportunities. Not in the form of fossil fuels miles below the earth, not the natural gas reserves waiting to be harnessed to heat the homes of its citizens, not the peninsular seas that offer seemingly endless booty for our bountiful feasts. The resources I speak of are in the form of local and Alaskan Native students who through perseverance and strength have taken the daunting task of walking, riding, flying or literally mashing out of their village with hopes, dreams, and aspirations all directed toward the opportunity to stand and say..."I want to be a physician".

These enthusiastic individuals wish to become palimpsests; they wish to start a new chapter, wipe away the old and begin a new. And given their social and cultural past experiences which will still show residual presence on their "tablets" they will be able to

add to the foundation that permeates and personifies the heart of Osteopathic Medicine...diversity.

No doubt that Dr. Still would be pleased. As he now looks down and smiles from eternity, he has seen his vision resound across the decades, he has watched his life's passion take root and flourish, he has seen his vision become in some regions a staple and model for medicine as a whole, and he has witnessed the self-actualization of Osteopathic Medicine...yes, I believe it's safe to say he is proud. So what was he truly thinking when that photograph was taken? My opinion...I think he gleams with prophetic pride. He appears wise way before his time, and well beyond his years, His face is stellar with curiosity and intrigue. He appears to be looking at things in a different way...he is wiping away his tablet, his philosophical palimpsest...My interpretation...we are witnessing the birth of Osteopathic Medicine.

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