

Overview of Osteopathic Medicine

Osteopathic medicine is a distinctive form of medicine practiced in the United States. Osteopathic physicians use all of the knowledge, skills, tools and technology available to modern physicians, with the added benefits of a holistic philosophy and a system of hands-on diagnosis and treatment known as osteopathic manipulative medicine. Doctors of osteopathic medicine emphasize helping each person achieve a high level of wellness by focusing on health promotion and disease prevention.

Osteopathic medicine was founded in the late 1800s in Kirksville, Missouri, by Andrew Taylor Still, MD, who believed that some medical practices of the day often could cause more harm than good. After losing members of his immediate family to meningitis, Dr. Still focused on developing a system of medical care that would promote the body's innate ability to heal itself. He called his system of medicine osteopathy, now known as osteopathic medicine.

Osteopathic physicians, also known as DOs, work in partnership with their patients. They consider the impact that lifestyle and community have on the health of each individual, and they work to erase barriers to good health. DOs are licensed to practice the full scope of medicine in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and other territories of the United States as well as in more than 50 countries abroad.¹ They practice in all types of environments, including the military, and in all specialties, from family medicine to obstetrics to surgery to cardiology.

From their first day of medical school, DOs are trained to look at the whole person, which means they see each person as more than just a collection of body parts that may become injured or diseased. DOs are taught that the whole person is greater than the sum of his or her parts, and that patients should be treated as partners in the health care process. They are trained to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds, and they are given the opportunity to practice these skills in the classroom and a variety of other settings.

Because of the whole-person approach to medicine, 55.6 percent of all DOs choose to practice in the primary care disciplines of family practice, general internal medicine and pediatrics.² The remaining 44 percent go on to specialize in one of any number of practice areas.² If a medical specialty exists, you will find DOs practicing it.

There are 63,121 active DOs in the United States.² DOs boast a strong history of serving rural and underserved areas, often providing their unique brand of compassionate, patient-centered care to some of the most economically disadvantaged members of our society.

In addition to studying all of the typical subjects you would expect student physicians to master, osteopathic medical students complete approximately 200 hours of training in osteopathic manipulative medicine. This system of hands-on diagnosis and treatment helps alleviate pain, restore motion, and support the body's natural structure to help it function more efficiently.

One key concept osteopathic medical students learn is that structure influences function. Thus, if there is a problem in one part of the body's structure, function in that area and in other areas may be affected. For example, restriction of motion in the lower ankle can restrict motion in the knee, hip, and lumbar spine, causing symptoms throughout. By using osteopathic manipulative medicine techniques, DOs can help restore motion to these areas and eliminate pain.

Another integral tenet of osteopathic medicine is that the body has an innate ability to heal itself. Many of osteopathic medicine's manipulative techniques are aimed at reducing or eliminating impediments to proper structure and function so that this self-healing mechanism can assume its role in restoring a patient's health.

In addition to their strong history of providing high-quality patient care, DOs conduct clinical and basic science research to help advance the frontiers of medicine and to demonstrate the effectiveness of

the osteopathic approach to patient care. Founded in 2001, the Osteopathic Research Center in Fort Worth, Texas, conducts and promotes research on the pathophysiological mechanism and clinical outcomes of osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM). The center serves as a catalyst for developing and conducting multi-center, collaborative clinical research studies. Initial studies have focused on demonstrating the effectiveness of osteopathic manipulative medicine as it applies to many facets of patient care.

For more information about the history of osteopathic medicine, see the reference and resource list starting on page 25 of this book.

¹ Source: American Osteopathic Association; DOs Around the World; www.osteopathic.org/index.cfm?PageID=ost_intl

² Source: American Osteopathic Association; DO Distribution among Medical Specialties; www.osteopathic.org/pdf/AOA_2010_OMP_Report.pdf

What Does a DO Do?

- Throughout the country, DOs practice the full scope of medicine in all specialties of the medical field, from pediatrics to geriatrics, and from sports medicine to trauma surgery.
- DOs receive the same medical training as their MD counterparts, as well as 200 hours of osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM) training. OMM is a hands-on therapy that is used to diagnose and treat illness and injury.
- DOs are trained to focus on the whole person, working with patients to achieve high levels of wellness and disease prevention.

Why Consider a Career in Osteopathic Medicine?

Do you want to be the type of physician who sees the patient as more than a symptom or disease? Do you want to be the kind of physician who gets involved in his or her community and who spends time getting to

know his or her patients as people? Are you the kind of person who is compassionate, who enjoys meeting and getting to know a diverse range of people from many different backgrounds and socioeconomic groups? Are you the kind of person who has solid communication skills and a healing touch? If you answered yes to some or all of these questions, osteopathic medicine may be a good career option for you.

Generally, osteopathic medical schools are looking for a variety of personal qualities in the applicants they admit to their schools and, ultimately, to the osteopathic profession.

Osteopathic medical schools admit many nontraditional students. Typically, these students come to osteopathic medicine as a second career from a diverse set of backgrounds. Osteopathic medical schools have admitted students who have been administrators, managers or executives in business, attorneys, professional musicians, newspaper reporters, allied health care providers, and the list goes on. Many of these students have families, and some are single parents.

Admission to osteopathic medical school is competitive and selective. A person who is well-rounded, has a broad background, demonstrates the qualities listed above, and who has demonstrated academic excellence has the best chance for admission to osteopathic medical school.

Osteopathic Medicine in an International Context

The practice of osteopathic medicine outside of the United States varies. In many countries, osteopathic physicians have full practice rights, as DOs have in the United States. However, only in the U.S. are DOs trained as physicians. Outside the U.S., DO training is concentrated on OMM and practice rights are typically limited to manipulation. The most up-to-date information on this is available from the **Osteopathic International Alliance** (www.oialliance.org) and the **American Osteopathic Association** (www.osteopathic.org). Specific information about Canadian osteopathic medical practice is available from the **Canadian Osteopathic Association** (www.osteopathic.ca).

Admissions policies at U.S. osteopathic medical colleges vary with regard to applicants who are neither U.S. citizens nor hold permanent resident status in the United States. The table on page 14 lists whether schools will consider applicants who are not U.S. citizens.

Prospective applicants to osteopathic medical colleges should consider that in the typically seven-plus years between entering medical school and going into practice, the conditions and regulations on practice outside the United States may change significantly.

Prospective osteopathic physicians who are interested in participating in overseas medical mission and volunteer work will not encounter difficulties – participation in such programs is generally arranged by the sponsoring organization, and U.S. physicians—both DOs and MDs—have practice rights extended to them while participating in such programs. Many osteopathic colleges sponsor such programs, which may be open to participation by their students, faculty, and alumni.

Learning About the Practice of Osteopathic Medicine and Shadowing a DO

Colleges of osteopathic medicine encourage applicants to learn more about the profession by identifying an osteopathic physician to shadow. Many of the colleges require applicants to get to know a DO and request a letter of recommendation as part of the application process. Applicants should meet and spend time shadowing the physician. This provides the applicant with exposure to the osteopathic profession and enhances awareness of osteopathic medical philosophy. Working with a physician will prepare the applicant for the application interview. Completing this crucial step also demonstrates the applicant's commitment to the osteopathic profession.

Students should contact an osteopathic physician before applying for admission, beginning as early as possible while in undergraduate education.

The best ways for finding osteopathic physicians include:

- Osteopathic college admission and alumni offices. Admission and alumni officials at school have many contacts in the osteo-

pathic profession. Contact them, and let them know that you are looking to shadow and learn more about becoming an osteopathic physician.

- The American Osteopathic Association (AOA) membership office. The AOA maintains an online national directory of practicing DOs. A locality search will give you contact information, and in many cases will link you to the website of your state's osteopathic association.
- Contacting state osteopathic associations. Many of the state associations compile lists of their members who have indicated an interest in having prospective osteopathic medical students shadow them.
- Your college's pre-health advisor.

Once you have found a doctor near you, call or send the doctor a letter. (Remember most doctors are very busy, so please be respectful if you cannot speak directly to the DO.) If you explain your interest and share your enthusiasm for the profession, many DOs' offices will be delighted to host you for a day or two. They will be able to show you what they do so that you can decide if you want to study osteopathic medicine.

Current osteopathic medical students are another good source of information about osteopathic medical education. The colleges have student ambassador programs, alumni, student government leaders and members of the Student Osteopathic Medicine Association, all of whom are eager to talk about their schools with prospective medical students. For further information, contact the admissions office at the schools in which you are interested.

To contact the AOA Membership Office:

AOA Website: www.osteopathic.org
AOA Address/Phone:
American Osteopathic Association
142 East Ontario Street
Chicago, IL 60611
(800) 621-1773
(312) 202-8000 (for international calls)