

# An Introduction to Clinical Research in Osteopathic Medicine

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## KEYWORDS

- Osteopathic medicine • Research • OMT • OMM
- Manipulation • Risks

Osteopathic medicine encompasses a unique philosophy, distinct diagnostic methods, and complementary manipulative treatment that sets it apart from allopathic medicine. Osteopathic medicine is the smaller of the 2 schools of medicine in the United States, but the number of Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine (DOs) is increasing at a higher rate than allopathic physicians (MDs).<sup>1</sup> This article introduces osteopathic medicine, including a brief history, education requirements, philosophy, and potential risks of OMT (osteopathic manipulative treatment). The main body of this article focuses on difficulties associated with conducting osteopathic research and provides an overview of available studies, which have researched the effect of OMT on various conditions.

## HISTORY

Andrew Taylor Still, the founder of osteopathic medicine, was the son of a Methodist minister and pioneer physician. His fascination with human anatomy and the science of healing influenced him to become a physician. As a typical frontier physician, he had to deal with common epidemics of his day, such as cholera, malaria, pneumonia, smallpox, diphtheria, and tuberculosis. Three of his children died from spinal meningitis and he became increasingly disillusioned with medical practices of his day. Because of this, in 1872, he established the healing art of osteopathy.<sup>2</sup>

A.T. Still became a wandering physician because his new ideas were not accepted in Kansas. He traveled throughout Kansas and Missouri, treated patients, and described his methods to countless people. For many years, Kirksville, Missouri

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was Dr Still’s base while he traveled. By 1889, however, there were a great number of patients traveling to see Dr Still at his newly founded infirmary there. He no longer had to travel to practice osteopathic medicine. His practice grew, and he gained more respect.<sup>2</sup>

In 1892, Dr Still opened the American School of Osteopathy (ASO) in Kirksville, Missouri. He taught the art of osteopathic medicine through lecture, demonstration, and direct patient care. The first diplomas were awarded to 18 graduates of the ASO in 1894. Additional schools opened as osteopathic medicine began to spread throughout the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, *osteopathic medicine* has replaced the term *osteopathy* and *osteopathic physician* has replaced the term *osteopath*. The word “osteopath” now describes only practitioners before 1960. “Osteopathy” is the profession as practiced outside the United States (by practitioners who did not train at American Osteopathic Association [AOA]-accredited osteopathic medical colleges).<sup>2</sup>

**EDUCATION, LICENSING, AND PRACTICE**

As of May 2009, there are 25 osteopathic medical schools with 31 locations in 22 states.<sup>3</sup> Each school is accredited by the AOA’s Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation, which is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>4</sup> Facts about osteopathic physicians are found in **Box 1**.

Application requirements for osteopathic and allopathic medical colleges are similar. Historically, osteopathic schools have placed increased emphasis on the interview to assess interpersonal communication skills.<sup>4</sup>

The curriculum at osteopathic medical schools involves 4 years of academic study, the same as in allopathic medical schools. The colleges of osteopathic medicine (COMs) emphasize preventive medicine and comprehensive patient care. Throughout the curriculum, students learn to use osteopathic principles and manipulative techniques to diagnose and treat patients. An additional 150 to 200 hours during medical school is spent learning osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM).<sup>7</sup> After graduation, DOs complete residency training just as MDs do.<sup>4</sup> DOs can choose to complete an osteopathic, allopathic, or a dually accredited residency.

A study by Peters and colleagues<sup>8</sup> demonstrated that careers in primary care are better supported in osteopathic medical schools than in allopathic schools. Primary care is emphasized at osteopathic schools, and students are encouraged to pursue primary care careers by their faculty. Osteopathic medical schools also have a higher percentage of primary care faculty than do allopathic schools.

**Box 1**  
**Facts about osteopathic physicians**

By the year 2020, there will be an estimated 100,000 practicing osteopathic physicians in the United States.

Approximately 65% of practicing DOs specialize in primary care.

DOs comprise 6% of the US physician population.

Many DOs practice in rural and other medically underserved communities.<sup>4</sup>

Approximately 70% of Family Medicine DOs use OMT, but less than 10 % use it during more than half of their patient encounters.<sup>5</sup>

Approximately 50% of all osteopathic physicians use OMT.<sup>6</sup>

*Data from Refs. <sup>4-6</sup>*

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