

# **OSTEOPATHIC CARE OF CHILDREN**



**OSTEOPATHIC HEALTHCARE OF MAINE**  
**OSTEOPATHIC CARE OF CHILDREN**  
Donald V. Hankinson, D.O.

Childhood is a time when the potential for mental, physical and spiritual growth is profound. To realize this potential, however, the child must successfully meet many challenges. Some of these are the result of trauma or illness and others are part of the normal course of development. What follows is a perspective of the benefits that osteopathic treatment provides for children in their efforts to achieve and to maintain their optimal level of growth and development.

Life begins with the challenge of birth. During the normal process of labor and delivery, the infant must successfully negotiate the difficult passage from life in the womb to life in the world. Their musculoskeletal system must cope with the mechanical demands of traveling through the mother's pelvis, including the bending and twisting that this requires. The fluid fields within the infant must withstand the tremendous pressures generated by the contraction of the powerful uterine muscles. Furthermore, the infant's head must conduct this considerable force to the muscles and the bones of the mother's pelvis, spreading them to create an opening through which the infant can enter the world. These issues can become amplified with prolonged labor, with breech presentations, or with other complicated birth situations. Many necessary interventions, such as the use of forceps or Caesarian sections that may minimize some of these challenges, can aggravate or cause others.

The bones of the body are not yet fused in the newborn. This allows the bones to have a greater ability to yield and to bend so that they can accommodate the physical stresses and the mechanical demands of the birth process. However, their increased flexibility leaves the bones more vulnerable to the considerable forces that occur during even a routine delivery. As a result, the organs that they contain, and the nerves and blood vessels that pass through them, are vulnerable to injury. Any of the body's physiologic systems can be affected. For instance, compressive forces at the base of the skull can result in a wide range of problems, including ineffective suckling, persistent vomiting, colic, constipation, irritability, breathing difficulties, blocked tear ducts, and torticollis.

As the child grows, unresolved traumas can manifest as problems in any of the body's organ systems. If the temporal bones which house the ears are not free to move, ear infections might result. Restrictions in the normal motion of the lower ribs and the abdominal diaphragm can cause the child to be more susceptible to respiratory and gastrointestinal abnormalities. Compression of the joints of the pelvis and of the lower back may interfere with the child's efforts in learning to stand and/or walk, and can also be associated with problems in bowel and urinary function, including toilet training. Undetected abnormalities may not become evident for years until some additional stressor overwhelms the compensatory balance established by the healing forces within the individual, causing problems that suddenly seem to appear "out of nowhere."

Osteopathic Medicine is distinguished by a unique and profound respect for the healing power within the patient that is accessible to physicians who use their hands. The father of Osteopathy, Andrew Taylor Still, M.D., provided four "basic principles" to guide osteopathic physicians (D.O.) in their efforts to apply this new science for the benefit of their patients.

These principles are:

1. Our bodies, our minds, and our spirits are not separate from each other. They work together and respond together to any of the outer or inner forces that act upon us.
2. There are healing powers within each of us. These innate forces work to prevent us from becoming sick and help us to regain our health should we become ill.
3. Our body's ability to work properly requires that its structures have normal alignment and motion. Likewise, our body's structure remains normal as long as the body is working properly.
4. Treatment must be based upon these principles.

Many of these principles may not seem as revolutionary today as when they were first introduced by Dr. Still. There are many holistic therapies that reference similar philosophical foundations. The fourth principle, however, challenges us to act in accordance with our philosophy. According to Dr. Still, it is neither our belief system nor the type of treatment we employ that makes the process holistic. The essential feature of holistic healthcare is the acknowledgment, in its methods of diagnosis and treatment, that the innate forces at work within the patient are the primary source of healing. Our attention must be primarily oriented to the whole patient, not to their disease process.

Dr. Still was challenging the osteopathic physician to establish a healthcare system that was actually based upon *health* care, both in theory and in practice. This central concept is the most radical and important in his vision of Osteopathy as a new science of healing. Dr. Still expressed it simply and directly: "To find health should be the object of the doctor. Anyone can find disease." In other words, it is the doctor's responsibility to learn to perceive these healing forces and to unlock their potential. If our patients are able to heal themselves as they were designed to do, the full promise of their human potential will be available to them.

Dr. Still was also very clear about the tools osteopathic physicians would need to apply the principles of his concept to the care of their patients. With a thorough knowledge of anatomy and

intensive training in using their hands to feel when this anatomy is working normally, osteopaths are able to perceive the fundamental state of health in their patients. They can then be guided by the innate forces to address the restrictions limiting that health's full expression. Through our diagnostic touch, the healing forces may also direct us to evaluate areas seemingly unrelated to the patient's problem. With the guidance of these forces, the osteopath becomes aware of the role these areas play and is able to treat them. This opportunity promotes more efficient and complete healing and, therefore, results in more efficient and complete growth and development.

## **Osteopathic Manipulative Medicine**

Osteopathic Manipulative Medicine (OMM) encompasses a broad range of diagnostic and therapeutic approaches designed to assist the healing forces within each of us. Some treatment approaches are more vigorous, others more gentle. The decision as to which approach is appropriate for a particular patient is based upon the patient's needs and desires, as well as upon the information obtained by interview and examination at that appointment. Treatment is then applied within the context of Dr. Still's basic principles, although the approaches utilized may vary widely from one osteopath to another based on their interests, training, and experience.

Osteopathy is of significant benefit in assisting patients to obtain optimal health and to maintain a state of well being. If people have suffered trauma or are not responding as expected to their current treatment program, it is reasonable to consider an osteopathic evaluation to determine if there are issues that can be addressed with this approach. Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment (OMT) will be of primary importance in the recovery of health for some patients. It is of particular significance in the care of children because of its effects on their future physical, intellectual, and emotional development.

OMM recognizes the importance of re-establishing the original balance in the fluids and the tissues of the body. Once regained, this balance allows the healthy functioning of all systems in the body to be restored and maintained. The gentler osteopathic approaches, including Cranial Osteopathy and BioDynamics, are of unique benefit and necessity in caring for the children. The techniques employed in this form of OMT involve gently holding the involved area of the body in a way that augments the effectiveness of the forces of healing within the patient. The osteopath then monitors and modulates the action of these inner forces, allowing them to make the correction rather than applying a force from the outside.

## **Osteopathic Physicians - Training and Practice**

Osteopathic training includes four years of medical school, an internship, and a clinical residency program in any of the medical or surgical specialty areas (Family Practice, Pediatrics, Neurology, Cardiac Surgery, etc.). Osteopathic physicians are then licensed by their states and granted the rights and responsibilities of practicing that specialty. In addition, they have the opportunity to offer the benefits of osteopathic care to their patients. Some DOs choose to pursue Osteopathic Manipulative Medicine as their area of specialty training and practice, and become board certified in this discipline.

Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment, including Cranial Osteopathy, is one of the most profound and powerful applications of the osteopathic physician's entire educational and training program, influencing the structure and functioning of all of the organs and systems of the body. It was developed by Dr. Still, and has been refined by osteopaths over the years, as a tool for applying the principles of Osteopathic Medicine in the care of patients. OMT, therefore, is most appropriately utilized by physicians, whose scope of training and practice encompasses this highest level of medical responsibility.

Osteopathic Healthcare of Maine (OHM) is dedicated to applying these principles in the care of our patients. All of our physicians are board certified in the use of OMM and our practice is limited to consultations for this type of care. We use the full range of osteopathic modalities, with an emphasis on Cranial Osteopathy and BioDynamics. Our practice welcomes patients of all ages and provides care for the full spectrum of their health concerns. OHM also recognizes that Osteopathy is an evolving science. We are active in the study and teaching of Osteopathy and its insights into non-invasive health care.

*This article was created for the benefit and education of the community and of interested healthcare professionals. Please do not use or reproduce our presentation of these concepts, in whole or in part, without receiving the written permission of OHM. Thank you.*