



# The core principles of osteopathic philosophy

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**Abstract** The Osteopathic approach to health care is not based upon performing sequential manipulative techniques, but in expressing the philosophy of Osteopathy in a clinical context. Historically, few attempts have been made to create a collection of clinically relevant guiding principles. The Osteopathic profession needs a unique set of historically accurate principles that express our distinctiveness in a health care environment that contains many choices in alternative medicine as well as mainstream medicine. These ten core principles are derived from the extensive writings of Andrew Taylor Still and are a refinement and a modern translation of his 19th Century writing style into a 21st Century perspective.

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## Introduction

Andrew Taylor Still discovered and developed the healing art and science known as Osteopathy. He created a system of health care founded upon the therapeutic actions of Osteopathic Manipulation. The Osteopathic approach is not based on performing sequential manipulative techniques, but in expressing the philosophy of Osteopathy in a clinical context. Osteopathic Manipulation is the practical application

of Osteopathic philosophy, but what is Osteopathic philosophy and how do we apply it clinically?

Any distinct philosophy contains a collection of guiding principles. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to succinctly define Osteopathy. We can, however, describe many of the core principles and by doing so arrive at a clinically relevant philosophy. Osteopathy is a vast art and science that is open to many interpretations. It is essential that a historically accurate attempt be made to collect the most exceptional components of Still's teachings so that Osteopathy can be known as being distinct and unique.

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Since Still's death in 1917, few efforts have been made to condense his extensive and oblique teachings into a comprehensible and concise set of principles. The dominant attempt to create a set of guiding principles was published in 1953 by a committee of American DOs who created what they called the Osteopathic Concepts.<sup>1</sup> Their version was limited to these four tenets:

1. The body is a unit.
2. The body possesses self-regulatory mechanisms.
3. Structure and function are reciprocally inter-related.
4. Rational therapy is based upon an understanding of the body unity, self-regulatory mechanisms and the interrelationship of structure and function.

More recently, these four Osteopathic Concepts have been edited into this new interpretation of Still's philosophy<sup>2</sup>:

1. The human being is a dynamic unit of function.
2. The body possesses self-regulatory mechanisms that are self-healing in nature.
3. Structure and function are interrelated at all levels.
4. Rational treatment is based on these principles.

Sometimes an attempt to organize a complicated collection of ideas into a few simplified concepts eliminates the core values of a philosophy. By oversimplifying a system as complicated as Osteopathy, aren't we really doing our profession a disservice? The four concepts of Osteopathy as proposed in 1953 and revised in 2009 do not express the distinctiveness of Osteopathy. Instead they are a vague set of ideas that many non-Osteopathic health care professionals and alternative medicine practitioners also advocate.

Modern Osteopathic philosophy has primarily been based upon an unwritten and implied set of multifaceted principles transmitted in the oral tradition. As an Osteopathic historian, I have extensively studied the life and work of Andrew Taylor Still. Moreover, I have explored the writings of the early Osteopathic pioneers who recorded their understanding of the original education given to them in the late 1800s and early 1900s by the founder of Osteopathy. I adopted the perspective of William Garner Sutherland, DO when he asked us to "read in between the lines" of Still's writings to gain greater knowledge and insight and to use an interlinear perceptivity in discovering for

ourselves the hidden treasures that Andrew Taylor Still left us in his extensive body of work.<sup>3</sup>

We need a set of core principles that expresses our distinctiveness as Osteopaths. I have encapsulated what I believe are the ten most important and accessible principles of Osteopathy. Of course, the philosophy of Osteopathy is greater and more extensive than these ten principles. However, it is essential that we embrace a more comprehensive and practical version of Osteopathic Philosophy rather than accept oversimplification without distinctiveness.

### The core principles of osteopathic philosophy include

1. Human beings function holistically in a dynamic state of connected oneness.

The term "holism" was not coined as term until 1926 and was not made famous until the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Holism is based upon Aristotle's philosophy of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The concept of holism is in essence a law of nature. It is the ecologic expression of equilibrium for human beings integrated with their environment. In a very Aristotelian way, Still expressed holism when he stated, "We look at the body in health as meaning perfection and harmony, not in one part, but as the whole."<sup>5</sup> The concept of holism permeates all of Still's work and is an indispensable component to basic Osteopathic philosophy. Identified here are many of the corresponding terms, or key words, for holism utilized by Still, they include:

*Connected oneness, harmony, the whole, whole being, whole body, whole system, common whole, human body as a whole, perfection and harmony of the whole body, body functioning united, the whole with harmonious action, harmonious combination, united in form, not one part but of the whole body, complete in form, universality of fascia, mechanical harmony, man in his completed form, and normal equilibrium.*

The most fascinating expression of Still's perception of holism is that of *connected oneness*. This term is buried in an obscure paragraph in *Philosophy and Mechanical Principles* and the concept is resonant with the way Still emphasized harmony, wholeness, universality, equilibrium, balance, and the interconnectedness of systems.<sup>5</sup>

2. The body and psyche have the ability to self-heal, or to adapt, in the presence of disease

or injury. Respecting this natural law forms the foundation of all treatment.

Still did not name the forces of healing; he generically referred to them as *Nature*. Some of these forces have been identified by modern science and others are ineffable. Still was very clear in stating that the work of healing is performed by Nature and he gives "Nature the ascendancy" (meaning recognition) for the self-healing augmented by Osteopathic Manipulation.<sup>6</sup> "Nature has no apology to offer. It does the work..."<sup>7</sup> Nature performs the repair and delivers the therapeutic actions. Nature is the true doctor that performs the ultimate acts of healing and the beneficial compensatory adjustments. If we as Osteopaths can remove the obstructions that cause disease and support the conditions that promote healing, then Nature's chemistry, drug store, and remedies can perform the necessary actions to restore equilibrium at whatever level is possible for that individual patient. Still emphasized that "Health is Nature" and that healing emerges from what is healthy in us rather than from what is diseased.<sup>5</sup> Our dictum as Osteopaths is best expressed in this sentinel statement by Still, "To find health should be the object of the doctor. Any one can find disease."<sup>8</sup>

3. The relationship between structure and function impacts the overall health of the entire body. Structure (anatomy) and function (physiology) are interconnected and inseparable in disease and health.

Still never used the exact phrase "structure and function are interrelated." He used other expressions that fundamentally link structure and function. He stated, "Osteopathy is that science which [helps the body] regain its normal equilibrium of structure and function."<sup>6</sup> Understanding the essential mutual linkage between the anatomy (structure) and physiology (function) forms an undisputed foundation of how Osteopaths see and perceive the body in health and disease. From a clinical perspective, we utilize the interrelationship between structure and function to inform Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment. Still said it best when he declared, "The philosophy of manipulations is based upon an absolute knowledge of the form and function."<sup>7</sup>

4. A precise anatomic diagnosis is made using hands-on palpation of the body. Once a diagnosis is made, a patient-specific dynamic Osteopathic treatment plan may then be implemented.

The science of Osteopathy cannot exist without knowing and understanding the intricacies of anatomy. One component of holism is anatomic unity. Still said, "We know that if we ever know the whole, we must first know the parts."<sup>5</sup> By knowing anatomy we can make a more precise diagnosis. By making a precise diagnosis we are better able to apply a specific Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment. By applying a specific Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment we not only remove the focal obstructions to self-healing but also augment the local and global health of the tissues. By restoring the ability of the body to self-heal we let the natural forces of healing do the work of repair thus allowing for the restoration of holism.

5. The musculoskeletal system (bones, muscles, and connective tissues) has a unique structure and function that impacts the overall health of the entire organism. When the musculoskeletal system fails to perform normally, the entire organism may suffer a localized or generalized disorder.

When Still said, "The mechanical principles on which osteopathy is based are as old as the universe," he was making reference to what we today call biomechanics.<sup>7</sup> A section heading in one of his books is titled, "Bones Considered First."<sup>5</sup> By insisting that Osteopaths have an intimate knowledge of anatomy he commonly referred to bones as well as muscles and connective tissues emphasizing how they form a mechanical scaffolding and provide an essential portal, or handle, allowing access to other tissues and body functions. He did not end or limit his work to bones, muscles and connective tissues but he frequently used the musculoskeletal system as a starting point in his philosophy of manipulation. He also recognized that a localized anatomically specific disorder or derangement often caused distant or global problems that upset normal whole body equilibrium.

6. Structural or functional disturbances of the musculoskeletal system, as well as any of the other systems of the body are treated by the application of an individualized Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment.

Osteopathic Medicine is a system of health care that depends upon utilizing a patient specific, anatomically accurate hands-on procedure known as Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment. Osteopathy cannot exist without the inclusion of Osteopathic Manipulation.

In addition, having a knowledge of anatomy without understanding how to effect change in the anatomy via Osteopathic Manipulation is clinically worthless. Still said it best when he declared, "A knowledge of anatomy is only a dead weight if we do not know how to apply that knowledge with successful skill."<sup>5</sup> He also said,

"What is osteopathy? It is a scientific knowledge of anatomy and physiology in the hands of a person of intelligence and skill, who can apply that knowledge to the use of man when sick or wounded by strains, shocks, falls, or mechanical derangement or injury of any kind to the body. An up-to-date osteopath must have a masterful knowledge of anatomy and physiology."<sup>5</sup>

As up-to-date Osteopaths we must constantly ask if our knowledge of anatomy and physiology is clinically advanced, are we using that knowledge intelligently, are we expanding our manual medicine skills, and are we evolving?

7. The goal of an Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment is to restore the natural ability to self-heal—or to creatively compensate—by augmenting the local and global health of the body and by removing obstructions to proper blood flow, fluid flow, or nerve function allowing for the restoration of motion.

Still never used the term Osteopathic lesion or somatic dysfunction. If those terms did not exist when the founder developed the Osteopathic system of health care then what did he diagnose and treat? What are the impediments to healing? What prevents the body from initiating a self-healing action? What does Osteopathic diagnosis and manipulation address in the tissues to help restore motion and to augment the body's natural ability to self-heal?

Built in to Still's teachings is the Osteopaths experience of "normal." Still emphasized that, "An Osteopath reasons from his knowledge of anatomy. He compares the work of the abnormal body with the work of the normal body."<sup>7</sup> As Osteopaths, to practically understand what is abnormal we must have an intimate knowledge of normal structure and function. For us to know clinical normal requires patience, a devotion to practice, and a dedication to learning the unique anatomy and physiology found in diverse clinical situations.

I have examined all of Still's writings searching for key words that reveal what categories of anatomically localized disease or functional impairments that he identified during the

diagnostic process and then treated with Osteopathic Manipulation. He used these key terms to describe his clinical experiences:

*Variation from health, variation from perfect health, diminished health or vitality, stale life, inharmony, disordered function, deviations from normal, displacements, disorganization, obstructions, interference, mechanical derangement, strain, localized shock, areas of friction, effects distant from cause, starvation of muscles, nerve irritation, local paralysis of nerves, areas of neurologic inhibition or stimulation, shortage of nerve supply, unnatural accumulations of fluids, ligated circulatory vessels, stricture or constriction of the passage of blood, congestion, stagnation, edema, suspended blood, venous congestion, congestion of the fascia, accumulation of fluids, unhealthy fluids, suspended forces, unnatural showings, dead fluids, devitalized fluids, and closed gates.*

An Osteopathic intervention has three key components. First, we make a detailed anatomic diagnosis while monitoring the vitality of the tissues. Second, we apply a tissue-specific and patient-specific Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment while also attending to the non-material milieu. Finally, we let the work of Nature do the true work of healing. Nature does the repair, renovation, restoration of motion, and creative compensation. We as Osteopaths only assist Nature by removing the impediments to the full expression of holism and help to promote the conditions that augment the therapeutic processes. Our work as Osteopaths is not mathematically additive it is logarithmically expansive. Still taught that, "Harmony only dwells where obstructions do not exist."<sup>8</sup>

8. Osteopathy is a health care system based upon finding and treating the causes of a disease or injury rather than only attempting to address symptoms. Pain is a symptom, not a disease. If pain is exclusively treated, and there is a failure to arrive at the origins of what is causing pain, then the therapeutic actions are limited. The causes of pain are often distant from the symptoms.

Still said it best when he declared, "I want it understood that I look upon the treating of effects as being as unwarranted as it would be for the fireman of a city to fight the smoke and pay no attention to the cause that produces it."<sup>7</sup> Effects (smoke) are symptoms. Addressing the cause (fire) is the goal of Osteopathic Treatment. Pain is

a common effect. Some of the time, effect/smoke/pain overlap with the cause/fire and when we treat the pain we treat the cause. Most of the time, the effect/smoke/pain is distant from the cause and Osteopathic philosophy demands that we find this distant cause and address the dysfunction that creates the diseased reaction.

9. There are two distinct and interrelated ways of perceiving during Osteopathic diagnosis and treatment. The *material field* is tangible and contains the biomechanical elements that are formed by the palpable anatomy and physical functions that are objective and can be measured. The *non-material field* is invisible and refers to the subjective bioenergetic elements that underlie the material form. The non-material field is the expression of subtle functions or inherent forces. The material and non-material fields coexist simultaneously and are unified in a dynamic state of connected oneness.

Veiled within Still writings is a key perceptual distinction that helps to guide Osteopathic diagnosis and treatment. Still delineated two perceptual access portals which he referred to as the "visible and invisible,"<sup>5</sup> and the "material and immaterial"<sup>5</sup> (I propose using the term *non-material* because the word *immaterial* has additional definitions in modern English that are unsuitable). The material field is the visible, tangible, objective, and measurable. It includes the physical elements contained in anatomy and the physiologic functions that are quantifiable. Coexisting with the material elements is the non-material field, which is invisible, intangible, subjective, and is not measurable. It includes the attributes of Nature that vivify the structure. Still reveals more concerning the non-material when he states,

"Does Nature have a finer matter that is invisible and that moves all that is visible to us? Life surely is a very finely prepared substance, which is the all-moving force of Nature, or that force that moves all nature from worlds to atoms. It seems to be a substance that contains all the principles of construction and motion, with the power to endow that which it constructs with the attributes necessary to the objects it has formulated from matter and sent forth as a living being."<sup>5</sup>

To efficiently access the non-material we use our hands to intelligently make physical contact with the patient's body. "All the principles of motion, life, and all its remedies to be used in sickness [are found] inside of the human body.

[They are] placed...somewhere in the structure...<sup>6</sup> As Osteopaths, we access the invisible that moves all that is visible through our connection with the structure.

Essential to A.T. Still's Osteopathic approach are the clinically practical principles of accessing the body as a material mechanic and concomitantly connecting with the "vital qualities of Nature."<sup>8</sup> I believe that when William Sutherland stated, "Dr. Still could not speak of all the things he understood about the living human body. We were not ready to hear him..." they were both referring to the invisible non-material forces within the body.<sup>3</sup> The Tides and the phenomena of primary respiration described by Sutherland are attributes of the non-material.

10. The foundation stone of the Osteopathic system of health care is based upon trusting the unnamed forces of healing, which are concordant with Nature. Each Osteopath cultivates a personal self-reflective practice and draws upon this inner work to provide an intimately interconnected Osteopathic Treatment.

Andrew Taylor Still had a profound inner life that influenced the development of Osteopathy. As 21st Century health care practitioners, we are often uncomfortable with discussions of religious ideas, spirituality, and references to the sacred. It is important to state that Osteopathy is not and never has been a religion nor does it have religious intentions. Still was deeply spiritual but was not religious. He did not promote one set of religious beliefs over another and was open-minded regarding each individual's personal choice in religious matters. He did, however, ask that we recognize the source of healing and revealed that, "Osteopathy is to me a very sacred science. It is sacred because it is a healing power through all of Nature..."<sup>7</sup> Still was mystical and was not only a physician, but also a metaphysician incorporating a sense of holism that extended beyond the corporal body. He was eloquent when he affirmed, "Here you lay aside the long words, and use your mind in deep and silent earnestness; drink deep from the eternal fountain of reason, penetrate the forests of that law whose beauties are life and death. To know all of a bone in its entirety would close both ends of an eternity."<sup>6</sup> There is no need to make long-winded proclamations or attempt to define the indefinable. Still was intentionally vague regarding the details of his personal approach to spirituality but he was clear that his students would be better Osteopaths if we

recognized that *something greater* influences the therapeutic actions initiated with our Osteopathic interventions.

Osteopathy has always been greater than the sum of its parts. However, to better experience the holism of Osteopathy we must describe in detail a set of core principles that informs our work. These distinctive core principles give anyone who appreciates the Osteopathic approach to health care a clinically relevant foundation. Most importantly, these ten core principles are historically accurate and are derived from the extensive writings of Andrew Taylor Still. They are a refinement and a modern translation of his 19th Century writing style into a 21st Century perspective.

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