

Medicine in Stamps

Andrew Taylor Still (1828-1917): founder of osteopathic medicine

Tan S Y, MD, JD and Zia J K, BA*

Professor of Medicine, University of Hawaii

* Research carried out during senior medical student elective, John A Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawaii

"I have no desire to be a cat, which walks so lightly that it never creates a disturbance."

– A.T. Still, MD, OD

Osteopathic medicine is uniquely American. It owes its origin to a country doctor named Andrew Taylor Still, who entered the world in a humble Virginian log house on August 6, 1828. His father was both a practising physician and a Methodist minister, and young Andrew learnt the art of healing by serving as his apprentice. He was also said to have attended classes at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Kansas City, but there are no apparent official records attesting to his attendance. A naturally charismatic man, his plain looks belied a powerful presence brought on by his grandiose tone and evangelical zeal. He dressed strangely, emphasising comfort over style, and was known to make speeches in house slippers. In his biography, Arthur Hildreth recounted many stories of the man who would become known as "The Old Doctor." He might have been more aptly called "The New Medic."

ESSENTIALS OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE

Andrew Still practised the conventional medicine of his time with dedication, until a dramatic series of personal tragedies overtook him. During a viral meningitis epidemic in 1874, three of his children perished. Shortly thereafter, his wife died in childbirth, and he subsequently lost yet another child from pneumonia. Incensed by his helplessness to save his loved ones, and already frustrated by the largely futile intervention he had provided as an army surgeon, he began to openly question the effectiveness of what he had been taught, things like bloodletting, blistering, rectal feeding and purging.

It was in this context that Andrew Still looked for a different approach to heal his patients. He vowed to seek out a better understanding of disease, and his passion forged a new path of thought. His search began in the realm of anatomy, something that he was comfortable with, being both a hunter and a practising physician. Bones held a special fascination for him, but even more inspiring were the interconnections and inter-relationships he envisioned between the skeleton, muscles and internal organs. He compared the human body to a machine, subject to mechanical laws, and reasoned that disturbance of equilibrium and precision can diminish its natural defences. He identified the musculoskeletal system as the key component on which the rest of the body was dependent. In 1874,

he adapted the Hippocratic belief of the unity of individual bodily parts, and hypothesised that by returning parts of the body to their natural positions, they would once again function synchronously as a whole unit. Thus, manual manipulation of the muscular and skeletal frameworks of the spine replaced the use of worthless surgery or drugs. Known

as osteopathic manipulative technique (OMT), this became the mainstay of osteopathic treatment, which allows the body, especially through its nervous system, to use its own defences to ward off disease.

From his success with OMT sprang the controversial declaration that drugs and surgery were unnecessary and harmful. In many ways, Still was right. The drugs of his day were much different from those prescribed today. Many of the agents in use at that time, including arsenic and mercury, are now known to be toxic. For instance, the Merck Manual of 1899 listed arsenic as treatment for diabetics who had lost too much weight. Like other physicians, Still had prescribed remedies that included morphine, belladonna, brandy and cinnamon. The most commonly-prescribed drug



was Calomel, now known as mercury chloride, which was used for everything from fever to constipation, for which it unquestionably worked due to its diarrhoea inducing side-effect. Calomel is now banned because of its toxicity and is regulated for use only as a fungicide and insecticide.

Predictably, his tenets met with rejection, with former peers labelling them repugnant and backward. Others attacked him personally, calling him a crank and a fake. Even Baker University in Baldwin, Kansas, a school founded by his family, spurned his offer to explain his methods. And his own brother, a respected clergyman, accused him of being mentally ill, his grandiose style of speech indeed leading many to question his sanity. One account by fellow churchgoers actually attributed the apparent curing of a patient to the work of the devil.

Notwithstanding his detractors, Andrew Still practised and taught the new philosophy and method with confidence, gathering scientific knowledge and clinical evidence to support the use of osteopathic treatments. In 1892, he built his own school in Kirksville, Missouri, naming it The American School of Osteopathy. It was one of the first institutions to grant admittance to minorities and women. The first graduating class included five women and 16 men, three of whom were Still's own children, and one his own brother. Over time, the school grew from a two-classroom frame structure to more than three times its original size, with the addition of a new infirmary and two new wings to accommodate the increasing stream of patients seeking osteopathic treatments.

LEGACY CONTINUES Still died at the age of 89 years on December 12, 1917. Prior to becoming a doctor, he was active as a politician, and was elected to the territorial legislature in October 1857. There, he spoke out against slavery and eventually helped to usher the State of Kansas into the Union on January 29, 1861. During the Civil War, he served both as an army surgeon and captain. But his greatest legacy is his philosophy of

treating patients as a whole person and not as a disease entity. Osteopathy worships the body's natural defences, and denounces the overt use of unproven drugs and invasive surgeries. Present day osteopathic schools in the United States, which award the Doctor of Osteopathy (DO) degree, share almost identical curricula with allopathic ones, which confer the Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree. Osteopathic schools, however, come with the added benefits of OMT and an emphasis of its underlying holistic philosophy.

In 1897, the American Osteopathic Association came into being. By the middle of the century, court challenges finally and firmly established the rights of DOs to practise as complete physicians and surgeons. There are currently over 54,000 practising osteopathic doctors in the U.S., representing approximately six percent of total U.S. doctors. Graduates from the 20 colleges of Osteopathic Medicine now matriculate into classically MD residency programmes, perform surgeries, and in a recent study, were found to actually prescribe more medical drugs than their allopathic counterparts. While Still's original osteopathic tenets replaced conventional therapy with OMT, this took place at a time when recommended treatments generally did more harm than good. Andrew Still was a strong advocate of evidence-based medicine, and he would surely have approved of the addition of today's safe and proven use of surgery and drugs to heal the body.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- About Osteopathic Medicine. Available at: www.osteopathic.org/index.cfm?PageID=ost_main. Accessed April 3, 2006.
- About osteopathy: how did osteopathy begin? Available at: www.osteohome.com. Accessed April 3, 2006.
- Biography of Andrew Taylor Still. Available at: osteopathic.org/index.cfm?PageID=ost_still. Accessed April 3, 2006.
- Brainy Quote. Available at: www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/andrew_taylor_still.html. Accessed April 3, 2006.
- Trowbridge C. Andrew Taylor Still, 1828-1917. Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 1991.
- Suter RE. A historical perspective of the philosophy of osteopathic medicine. In: Tenets of Osteopathic Medicine. Available at: www.osteopathic.org/index.cfm?PageID=ost_tenet. Accessed April 3, 2006.