

If you are like most people, you've probably been going to a physician ever since you were born and perhaps were not aware whether you were seeing an M.D. (allopathic physician) or a D.O. (osteopathic physician). You may not even know that there are two types of complete physicians in the United States.

The fact is that both M.D.'s and D.O.'s are both fully qualified physicians licensed to prescribe medications and perform procedures and surgeries.

But first, let's talk briefly about the history of osteopathic medicine.

Andrew Taylor Still, M.D., who was dissatisfied with the effectiveness of 19th century medicine, founded osteopathic medicine in the late 1800's in Kirksville, Missouri. He believed that many of the medications of the time caused more harm than good. Dr. Still was one of the first of his day to study the attributes of good health in order to better understand the disease processes.

After losing members of his immediate family to meningitis, Dr. Still developed a system of medicine that promotes the body's innate ability to heal itself and stresses preventive medicine through proper nutrition and fitness. He called this system of medicine osteopathy, now known as osteopathic medicine. His concept of medicine was based on the unity of all body parts, and he identified the musculoskeletal system as a key element of health.

Dr. Still pioneered the idea of "wellness" more than 130 years ago. In today's terms, osteopathic physicians evaluate each patient's personal health risks, including smoking, high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol levels, stress as well as other lifestyle factors. Osteopathic physicians act as teachers to help patients take more responsibility for their own health and to choose healthier habits.

Just as Dr. Still pioneered osteopathic medicine in 1874, today's D.O.'s serve as modern-day medical pioneers. Osteopathic physicians continue to be on the cutting edge of modern medicine and are able to combine modern medical technology with their own highly developed senses, to see and to listen carefully and to observe the whole patient and not just the injury or illness.

So, how do M.D.'s and D.O.'s compare in training and qualifications?

Both are complete physicians who are able to prescribe medications; are licensed by the state to diagnose, treat, and perform procedures and surgeries; have undergraduate degrees and graduated from medical school with advanced post-graduate training; may pursue a specialty that typically lasts three to six years of further education and training; belong to the same health insurance plans and are equally accepted by the military.

What about some of the distinctive features of osteopathic medical training?

In addition to the standard medical school curriculum, approximately 200 more hours are devoted to osteopathic principles and practice, which includes osteopathic manipulative treatments. Additional training in anatomy is combined with osteopathic manipulative medicine in order to help students better understand structure and function relationships. Physician-patient relationship skills that focus on interviewing and communication are often the highlights of the osteopathic curriculum.

What else do D.O's bring to medicine?

Osteopathic medical schools emphasize training students to be primary care physicians. D.O's practice a "whole person" or holistic approach to medicine (see below). Instead of just treating specific symptoms or illnesses, they consider the body as an integrated whole and focus on preventive medicine.

As part of their medical school curriculum, osteopathic physicians receive extra training in the musculoskeletal system-the body's interconnected system of nerves, muscles and bones that make up two-thirds of its mass. This training provides osteopathic physicians with a better understanding of the ways that an injury or disease in one part of the body may affect the other.

Many D.O's use osteopathic manipulative treatments (OMT) with conventional medical procedures to diagnose and treat illness and injury, which makes them highly sought among Olympic athletes, sport teams, and personal fitness enthusiasts.

What about some more facts about osteopathic physicians?

There are now approximately 1,400 licensed osteopathic physicians in the state of Arizona with more than 40,000 in the United States today. D.O's are one of the fastest growing segments of health care providers in the U.S. By the year 2020, it is expected that there will be more than 95,000 osteopathic physicians. More than 65% of all D.O's practice in the primary care areas of family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics and obstetrics/gynecology. Many osteopathic physicians fill the critical need for primary care doctors by practicing in small towns and rural areas.

What about the new specialty of integrative holistic medicine?

Integrative holistic medicine is the emerging medical specialty that addresses the whole person, body, mind and spirit. The practice of integrative holistic medicine synergies conventional and complementary/alternative therapies to prevent and treat disease, but most importantly to promote optimal health far beyond the mere absence of illness. Such body-mind-spirit approach integrates many disciplines and modalities, including but not limited to nutrition, bio-identical hormones, exercise, environment, herbs, homeopathy, acupuncture, manual medicine such as osteopathic manipulative treatment, mind-body medicine, social relationships and spirituality.

Integrative holistic medicine is a scientific discipline that connects emerging research to clinical practice. It focuses on patient-centered care rather than disease-focused treatment with an understanding and appreciation of individuality based on genetic and environmental uniqueness. There exists a dynamic balance of internal and external factors with web-like interconnections among the body's physiological processes that affect total body functioning. Integrative holistic medicine fosters the notion of health as a positive vitality, not merely the absence of disease, and the promotion of organ function as the means to enhance health span rather than just life span.

According to the American Board of Holistic Medicine, the guiding principles of integrative holistic medical practice focus on the following:

1. Optimal health and well-being
2. Healing power of unconditional love
3. Unity of body, mind, spirits and environments
4. Disease prevention rather than symptom management
5. Promotion of the innate healing ability
6. Integration of various healing systems, both conventional and complementary
7. Physician-patient relationship-centered care and cooperation
8. Uniqueness of all individuals
9. Teaching by example through personal and professional growth
10. Life experiences as learning opportunities

As discussed from my previous article, health may be perceived as a sliding scale, from A to F. Simply passing an exam does not mean getting an A. It is far more beneficial and cost-effective in the long run to focus on health promotion than disease management. Perhaps it is the right for our citizens to receive adequate medical treatment when we do get sick, yet it is indeed a privilege and a choice to become healthy and vibrant as we journey into the future.