A controlled study of palpatory diagnostic procedures: Assessment of sensitivity and specificity

Palpatory diagnosis is the key to the expression of osteopathic philosophy in medical practice. A comprehensive evaluation of the patient follows interpretations which are initiated and guided by an osteopathic physician's palpatory diagnostic skills.

In his initial text, *The philosophy and mechanical principles of osteopathy*,¹ Andrew Taylor Still defined osteopathy as being "a scientific knowledge of anatomy and physiology in the hands of a person of intelligence and skill." Slight anatomic deviation was to be seen as cause for the beginning of disease. Intelligence was required as the expression of a practitioner's individuality. Variation in any part of the body was to be appreciated from a correct knowledge of the form and functions of the body. These considerations are sufficient to establish the viewpoint that palpatory diagnosis and the attendant use of osteopathic manipulative treatment (OMT) are central to the philosophy of osteopathic medicine promulgated by Still.

More than 90 years later, Still's considerations have emerged as major factors in the design of clinical research studies dealing with OMT. Confirmation of clinical efficacy appears difficult to achieve within parameters of conventionally accepted criteria for validation. In their text "Musculoskeletal manipulation: Evaluation of the scientific evidence,"² Tobis and Hoehler recognize the significance of an individual physician's skill and the difficulty posed for generalization of results.

Osteopathic clinical research studies are increasingly emphasizing the consideration of accuracy of palpatory findings. Robert S. Tarr, Ph.D., reports on such a study on page 296/79 in this issue. Doctor Tarr is professor of physiology at the Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine. He and his co-authors designed a controlled study to assess the accuracy of palpatory clues alone in establishing a medical diagnosis. Their analysis of results indicates that palpating physicians did not have higher sensitivity or specificity of diagnosis than non-palpating examiners. In discussing their results,

the authors recognize the significance of controlling for inadvertent nonpalpatory clues. This is reflected in the manner in which patients were prepared for examination. The authors also emphasize that the palpating physicians in their study do not routinely attempt to diagnose on the basis of palpatory clues alone.

The role of palpatory diagnosis in osteopathic medical practice must be responsibly investigated by researchers and clinicians affiliated with colleges of osteopathic medicine. Such investigation must focus on the challenges expressed or implied in Andrew Taylor Still's view of the philosophy of osteopathic medicine. Research so directed will contribute to the fund of medical knowledge so that appropriate understanding of osteopathic contributions can emerge. Doctor Tarr and his co-authors have offered such a contribution.

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1. Still, A.T.: *The philosophy and mechanical principles of osteopathy*; copyright 1892 by the author; Hudson-Kimberly Publishing Company, Kansas City, Missouri, 1902

2. Tobis, J.S., and Hoehler, F.: *Musculoskeletal manipulation. Evaluation of the scientific evidence*. Charles C Thomas Publisher, Springfield, Illinois, 1986

Needed: An integrative approach

A recent article, "Medicine in the '80s: Need for an integrative approach,"¹ by Benjamin H. Natelson, M.D., is one of the most perceptive and thoughtful I have read in years.

Dr. Natelson points out that the practice of medicine has changed spectacularly since World War II. He notes that it is parallel to the change in strategies in medical research. Prior to World War II, emphasis was placed on physiology as an integrating factor, based on Walter B. Cannon's historic work on homeostasis. Following this, however, there was a shift of emphasis to biochemistry and more recently molecular biology. The trend was to