

OSTEOPATHS AND THE BRITISH SCHOOL OF OSTEOPATHY NEW HOPE FOR RELIEF FROM THE PAINS OF AGEING

by Alex Baron

As we grow older, we become more susceptible to injury, disease and pain. Although we can delay the inevitable, by leading a wholesome lifestyle, there is no "cure" for ageing. One of the principal afflictions of old age is osteoarthritis and allied bone and joint trouble. Where this is advanced and there is deformation of the bones and joints, there is no known cure, but it is possible to relieve much of the pain, and undoubtedly one of the most efficacious (and safest) methods of pain relief is by manipulation: osteopathy.

DOCTORS AND OSTEOPATHS

The attitude of the medical profession towards osteopathy is mixed. Some doctors regard it with unconcealed contempt; others view the osteopath's treatment as complementary to their own. Fortunately the latter view seems to be prevailing, so although osteopathy is still not available on the National Health, we are likely to see more referrals from doctors in the future, and greater application of this branch of holistic medicine.

WHAT IS AN OSTEOPATH?

An osteopath is neither a chiropractor nor a physiotherapist but is a highly trained specialist in disorders of the joints and muscles. Unlike a physiotherapist who works under a doctor, an osteopath works on his own and makes his own diagnosis. (About 50% of UK osteopaths are women; the term "he" is used throughout this article purely as a convention).

In the United Kingdom, osteopaths practise under the common law, which means that unlike the medical profession, anyone may call himself an osteopath and set himself up in practice, even someone with no medical training or knowledge whatsoever. However, there are three bona fide colleges of osteopathy in the UK, the oldest of which is the British School of Osteopathy. The BSO was founded 73 years ago, and its current patron is HRH The Princess Royal. Prospective students are carefully screened and have to undergo four years of intensive training during which time they will study anatomy, physiology, healthcare, pathology and nutrition, as well as gaining practical experience in manipulation and massage.

Graduates of the BSO are called Registered Osteopaths. When you consult an osteopath, if he has the letters MRO after his name, that means he was trained at the British School, and guarantees that you are in safe hands. The British School of Osteopathy is a registered charity and is funded entirely by fees and donations.

VISITING AN OSTEOPATH

When you visit an osteopath, the first thing he will do is take a full case history. This might take anything up to an hour. He will then make a full examination, especially of your spine, posture and any areas specific to your particular complaint. When he has concluded his examination he will decide if he can treat you. If at any time he feels osteopathy is not a suitable treatment for your condition he will tell you, and may advise you on what alternative treatment you should seek. There are some people who most definitely not submit to osteopathic treatment, these include: anybody with a surgically unstable spine, and anybody suffering from physical trauma, fractures or bone or spine cancer.

ARTHRITIS AND PAIN RELIEF

Osteoarthritis means, basically, wear and tear of the joints and causes great pain in itself. But it leads also to secondary pain by causing the surrounding muscles to tense, (to go into spasm). Osteopathic manipulation and massage can help alleviate this tension and thereby greatly improve the quality of life. Osteopathy can also give relief for low back pain, stiff necks and other neck problems, trapped nerves, migraine and has even been credited with curing ulcers.

TRAINING THE WHOLE PATIENT

If one or two of these claims sound far fetched, they are soundly grounded in medical science and have long been recognised by

the medical and psychiatric professions. Traditional medicine is reductionist; for example, if you go to your doctor with a chest complaint he will search specifically for a viral or bacterial infection. But it is now recognised that many medical complaints are caused not by a specific infection or injury but are intimately connected with others, often in a very subtle way. Perhaps the most widely recognised instance of this is stress, which is rapidly becoming a killer in our mile-a-minute modern world. When people are subjected to stress they become very anxious and their blood pressure rises (hypertension). Stress also causes muscles to tighten, particularly in the neck, so you can begin by worrying about something and end up becoming seriously ill. A person who visits an osteopath with a stiff neck often finds after some gentle manipulation and massage that alleviating the tension in the neck leads to a lessening or abating of the headaches or anxiety which may be the primary cause.

PSYCHOSOMATIC EFFECT

Because an osteopath is intimately concerned with the patient, there can also be a great psychosomatic relief of pain. This is how "faith healing" works; there is no magic in the laying on of hands, but there is a great empathy which is somehow transmitted from the "healer to the patient. Put more simply, a problem shared is a problem halved. A good example is that of acute back pain. According to a BSO osteopath who is also a qualified medical practitioner and psychiatrist: people with acute back trouble can feel humiliated and demoralised. They are rendered as helpless as a child, and the presence of a benevolent therapist to accompany the patient through the worst part of the illness can be most beneficial. Sadly this is seldom found on the National Health.

OTHER PROBLEMS AND TREATMENTS

Osteopathy can help relieve the pain associated with slipped discs and many sporting activities. A lot of our skeletal problems are

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caused by bad posture, women wearing high heels, people hunching forward instead of standing up straight or sitting erect. Of course, it is unrealistic to expect to cure the bad habits of a lifetime by a few sessions on an osteopath's couch, but some relief is usually noticeable from the first visit. As well as manipulation and massage, the osteopath may give you advice on simple changes to make to your lifestyle which can have a multiplier effect. If you have neck trouble, for example, he may give you a set of gentle exercises to practise. Or if you have poor co-ordination, he may demonstrate a marching exercise which will help you to develop a natural rhythm.

In this short article it is not possible to discuss all the specific problems an osteopath might be able to assist you with, but they include hiatus hernia, constipation, digestive complaints and heart conditions. It is the holistic method, the treatment of the whole patient which is credited for this. Another good example is poor circulation. Anything which improves this, gives rise to a general sense of well being and makes the rest of the body respond that much better.

REFERRAL TO AN OSTEOPATH

It is not necessary to be referred to an osteopath, but it can do no harm to talk it over with your doctor; he may be able to refer you to a good one. Do make sure though that the person you consult is properly qualified, either from the British School or from one of the other bona fide colleges.

COST

Osteopathy is not available on the National Health, but charges are very reasonable when one considers this is both a professional service and one that can be extremely therapeutic. For those who live within a reasonable distance of Central London, the BSO itself is the ideal place to visit. There are X-ray facilities, regular medical staff and even a cafeteria in the basement. The current scale of fees is £14 for an initial consultation, £11 for the second and third sessions, then £7 from the fourth session onwards. Concessionary fees apply for pensioners. Osteopaths in their own practices

generally charge more, but can one really put a price on relief from pain?

MORE ABOUT THE BRITISH SCHOOL

Osteopathy was founded in America. Andrew Taylor Still (1828 - 1917) who trained as a physician, developed the manipulative technique in the 1870's. In 1917 a student of Still's, a Scottish law graduate, James Martin Littlejohn set up the British School. The growth of osteopathy was slow, so too was the respect of the medical profession. In its first ten years the BSO graduated only ten students! and for many years a doctor who referred a patient to an osteopath ran the risk of being struck off.

The public though voted with their feet, and nowadays even many doctors believe osteopathy should be available on the National Health. The British School of Osteopathy has been based at 1-4 Suffolk Street since 1980, a two minute walk from Trafalgar Square. It treats over a thousand patients a week in its out-patients clinic as well as training a large body of students.

The BSO has an on-going appeal and receives no subsidies from either national or local government. The gentleman in charge of the BSO is retired chemist Sir Norman Lindop. Many years ago he went there as a patient and was so impressed by what he saw that he stayed on as Principal. The BSO can be contacted on 071-930 9254.



Sir Norman Lindop
BSO Principal