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Future Vision of Osteopathic Medicine

Osteopathic medical students now represent approximately 25% of all medical students in the US. Where once osteopathic physicians may have been misinterpreted by the community, there is an increased awareness; that beyond a strong foundation of medical knowledge, osteopathic physicians incorporate the tenants of the body's capacity for self-healing and that total care requires moving beyond the body to include the mind and spirit. The future of osteopathic medicine is one of continued growth where students who profess a passion to become a physician, seek out training that not only teaches them how to provide care to a patient, but remains steadfast in caring for the patient.

The place for Osteopathy in the modern world of medicine is an interesting one. I think now, more than ever, is our profession being sought out by the general public, and ready to be embraced. Most people today believe in the holistic approach to medicine. No longer are they just seeking medications to treat pathology, but they are seeking that holistic approach of treating the mind, body, and spirit, the very definition of Osteopathic Medicine. Many allopathic physicians are embracing this approach to medicine. However, for most people, they do not realize what they want and are seeking for already exists. I think here lies the problem. People say that this is the form of medicine that they want, but they still have not heard of Osteopathic Medicine.

Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities for osteopathic physicians have continued to grow exponentially practicing in all medical specialties demonstrating the attainment of knowledge and skills that allow them to provide care across a diverse spectrum; from new-born to end-of-life, health maintenance and prevention to chronic disease management, and from osteopathic manipulation to acute trauma surgery. Once a foot is in the door, the evidence speaks for itself, and what were once walls become a lattice of interdisciplinary patient care where each member of the healthcare team, contributes to their fullest extent.

The key to our profession's success lies in educating the public on our field of medicine. People only hear about the Osteopathic Profession in a negative light. Just recently, the topic of "What is a D.O.?" has come up again in reference to the media questioning the credentials and qualifications of the Dr. Sean Conley, the Physician to the President. The last time the Osteopathic Profession was last discussed in mainstream media when in a negative light in reference to Dr. Larry Nassar and the U.S. gymnastics team. Instead of waiting and trying to educate the general public on Osteopathic Medicine when it is portrayed negatively, we, as a profession, need to take a proactive approach and try to vigorously

spread the word of our profession. More and More students who are interested in a more holistic approach do find, apply to, and attend Osteopathic Medical Schools. So, going into medical school, I think there are many more who truly believe in our approach. However, an ongoing struggle that our students face the challenge of maintaining their unique identity as they continue forward in their medical education. Especially today, now that all residencies are under ACGME, more and more D.O. students feel obligated to take and do well on the USMLE Board Examinations. So already towards the end of their second year of medical school, they put all their Osteopathic Training aside to study and prepare for the Allopathic Board examinations. Then once on clinical rotations, as they rotate side by side with allopathic medical students, they are all treated the same, and no longer have the opportunity to practice and learn more Osteopathic Manipulative Medicine. So, for even those students who started medical school with a strong belief in our approach, by the time they finish medical school, they have unconsciously shifted their practice of medicine to more of an allopathic approach. As our profession fought to be recognized as equals among Allopathic Physicians, we have gained that position. But in doing so, we have lost the unique attributes that make us special.

Our greatest challenge will be that of loss of osteopathic identity. The profession that grew from Andrew Taylor Still in his observations of the harshness of medical care at that time, led to more than a re-examination of the interrelation of structure and function, but the care of whole person. Where once a physician was felt to be part of the family, the business of medicine seems to predominate, where time with the patient is being replaced by numbers of patients per hour. This is the greatest risk to the profession and one we must guard the next generation of physicians against.

Consequences

The move to a single accreditation system for residencies was intended to increase opportunities for osteopathic students to secure placements in residencies and fellowships that were previously limited. Rightfully so, this is not a one-way door but rather one which swings in both directions. Residencies that had previously secured placements for DO's now welcome MD's as well. Osteopathic graduates have historically specialized into primary care. One potential unintended consequence may be in that, with the combined closure of some osteopathic residencies and placement of allopathic grads into previous osteopathic programs, placement of osteopathic graduates into specialties may actually decrease with more graduates being pushed toward primary care. Time will tell.

Within all challenges, there lies opportunity. Our Knowledge is great, our caring deep, our touch healing. When the next generation seeks to become a physician and chooses to become a DO, we will have arrived.

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