



The destiny of the osteopathic profession: the osteopathic difference

This month, two addresses given before annual conventions of the American Osteopathic Association are reprinted. The first was delivered by W.B. Meacham, DO, in 1916 and the second by Donald Siehl, DO, in 1983. Both addresses spoke to the same theme, the destiny of the osteopathic medical profession, but the perspectives were very different. In 1916, the profession was undergoing a sea of change. The number of schools had decreased as a result of increasing standards following the Flexner reforms. Organized research was beginning in the A.T. Still Research Institute. "Reformers" were heard sounding the call to use some forms of drug therapy. Meacham had graduated shortly after the turn of the twentieth century and was not anxious to dilute the practice of osteopathic medicine as he knew it. He was fully convinced of the power of the ideas and ideals of the osteopathic movement to the point that he stated that "if osteopathy ever dies it will be murdered in the house of its friends." He sounded the call for all osteopathic physicians to become involved in their organizations, to be proud of their profession, and not to covet the "MD" degree. His call was to show through action the value of osteopathic medicine. As he succinctly stated, "Our destiny is just exactly what we make it."

Sixty-seven years later, Siehl made many of the same points, but in a different context. By 1983, the profession had been through the worst struggle of its existence, the amalgamation in California from which many thought it would not recover. It had not only recovered, but had begun 10 new schools, increased its membership dramatically, and had become recognized in all arenas. Research was showing strong support for its tenets, and it had accepted much of the modern *materia medica* into its armamentarium. The most daunting battle was at hand. Siehl was aware of the need not to prove that osteopathic medicine was as worthy of distinction as allopathic medicine, but to define the distinctiveness of the profession. He was an orthopedic surgeon who knew that distinctiveness and enunciated it well in his address. It is the realization that proper function of all body systems is the basis of health, and dysfunction in any region is the basis of disease. Proper treatment is to define the dysfunction and correct it, not to palliate symptoms. He recognized that manipulation was an important part of the treatment and that palpatory diagnosis was a primary means of determining dysfunction. He stated: "The osteopathic difference is more than manipulation. However, the most important distinctive difference remains the

usage of palpatory diagnosis and osteopathic manipulative treatment." He urged the members of the profession to be proud of the osteopathic difference, to participate in their profession, and to remember that the differences and not the similarities to the allopathic practitioners had propelled the profession to greatness.

Both of these great men emphasized the necessity of maintaining the distinctiveness of the profession and of participation by members of the profession in the profession's activities. Both foresaw the dangers to the profession of relinquishing the distinct character that had made the profession a unique American institution. Their message holds today as the profession seems on one level more successful than ever. Membership is growing rapidly, schools are proliferating, and the public is searching for physicians who understand the importance of normalizing function. The pressure for maintaining the distinctive character of the profession is, if anything, more acute now than ever before. Meacham and Siehl could give their addresses today and be as correct as they were 85 and 18 years ago.

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