



Education: how do we select our students?

The November issue of the *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* is devoted to educational topics. The articles reprinted here discuss a vital issue in osteopathic education: the selection of students to admit to the osteopathic curriculum. The first article, written by Joseph Yarborough, PhD, in 1939, was from an address before the 43rd annual convention of the American Osteopathic Association. The second article, by Otterbein Dressler, DO, MSc, came from an address before the 52nd convention of the same organization. Both men addressed the same issue, namely, how to best select students to take into the osteopathic educational program.

The first article was set in the time just before World War II, while the second article was written just after it. In 1939, World War II had not yet affected this country fully but was in progress. During the war years, the number of students available for matriculation was to significantly decrease. After the war, the number of students would go up dramatically as the veterans returned from duty with educational aid packages that enabled them to pursue higher education.

Dr Yarborough was a professor of psychology at Southern Methodist University. In his article, he provided the advice that an aptitude test needed to be developed to test students for their acceptability for pursuing a course in osteopathic medicine. He enumerated four important variables to be considered: mental ability, vocational interest, personality, and opportunity. His discussion of these variables showed that he was a strong believer in the emerging behaviorism of the times rather than in a genetic determinism for personality traits. His advice was that an aptitude test should be developed, but that it should be used only in conjunction with other indicators of an applicant's ability and interest in osteopathic medicine. He believed that by so doing, the failure rate seen in osteopathic schools could be dramatically reduced, thereby saving both societal and personal disappointment and loss.

Dr Dressler was professor and dean at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathy and wrote from the vantage of the new optimism emerging from the war years. He spoke of the need for idealism and for recruiting students who showed strong commitment. His comments were especially interesting in his insistence on seeking students with strong liberal arts backgrounds to avoid narrow focus. He recognized that the education of the osteopathic curriculum would provide strong science and medical skills, but not the understanding produced by acquaintance with the arts and humanities. Does this sound familiar? He urged the selection of students who truly

believed in the tenets of osteopathic medicine and who knew what it was they were entering—a minority profession that was still struggling with its place in medical history. He stressed the need for a personal interview during the selection process and that the interview should weigh heavily in selection. He presented the methods developed at his school for determining ranking of students based on grades, a vocational interest test, and the interview.

Both writers stressed the need for careful selection of students. It is interesting to compare the tone of the two articles—Yarborough sure that a test could be developed that would make the process much better, Dressler emphasizing the interview. Today, we have no standard osteopathic aptitude test. To its credit, the profession seems to have heeded Dressler's call for continued emphasis on the interview to determine qualities of perspective students that cannot be ascertained on a paper and pencil test. The profession remains convinced that a vital part of being an osteopathic physician lies in the student's ability to communicate and verbalize. Our student interviewees are bright. They have read the pamphlets about A.T. Still, MD, DO, and know that we are looking for people who want to be “family practitioners in underserved areas.” They can give the “right” answers. Yet, the interview serves a very important function in selection of students for our schools. As Dressler pointed out, nothing can take the place of a personal interview to learn the most about a candidate and his or her ability to relate to people—a primary function of an osteopathic physician.

Michael M. Patterson, PhD
Associate Editor