

Separate and Distinct: An Overview of Major Healing Professions

By Dr. Daniel A. Shaye

I'd like to see articles explaining the differences between medical doctors and osteopaths and chiropractors and physical therapists. -Pat C.

I'd love to tackle this question. I am the third chiropractor in my family; took my MCATs when considering becoming a D.C.-M.D.; have visited the birthplace of osteopathy; and lost my chiropractic valedictorian bid to a physical therapist classmate. I have a high level of respect for each of these diverse disciplines.

What we know as M.D. medicine is also called "allopathic" medicine. Compared to traditional Chinese medicine, allopathic medicine is a relatively new phenomenon. Allopathic medicine is traditionally traced back to Hippocrates (born 460 B.C.), the so-called "father" of modern allopathic medicine; M.D.'s take an oath named after this famous Greek healer. Chiropractic and osteopathy weren't founded until the 19th century, and both were founded in the American Midwest: Chiropractic in Iowa under Daniel David Palmer, and Osteopathy in Missouri under Andrew Taylor Still. Physical Therapy is in many ways the youngest of the professions, as it didn't become officially organized in the United States and Europe until around the turn of the 20th century; however, it's disingenuous to look to any single date as the "start" of a profession. Some of Hippocrates' methods and philosophies include other professional "turf," and the Chinese have been manipulating bodies for thousands of years. Though there are overlaps between the professions' histories and origins, today they are separate and distinct, each offering unique and valuable pieces to the health and disease care puzzle.

Allopathic (M.D.) medicine. M.D. medicine has long been at or near the top of the politically, economically, and socially dominant healing system in North America. There are roughly 700,000 M.D.'s in the United States. Like the other mainstream health professions profiled here, M.D.'s render a diagnosis before prescribing treatment. They perform surgery, they prescribe medication, and some of them are academics who research, teach, or both. After their core medical education, M.D.'s tend to specialize in everything from cardiology to radiology to oncology. Interestingly, specialization has eroded American Medical Association (A.M.A.) participation: today only about 10-20% of M.D.'s are listed as A.M.A. members.

Osteopathy. There are roughly 60,000 osteopathic doctors (D.O.'s) in the United States. Though osteopathy was born in reaction to 19th century allopathic medicine's failings, modern doctors of osteopathy are so similar to M.D.'s that it's likely you've been to a D.O. and didn't even know it. "Osteo" means "bone," and "pathy" refers to dysfunction, and the early osteopaths were very much focused on the role of the human frame as it relates to disease and pain; but few modern osteopaths practice chiropractic-like spinal manipulation. Modern osteopaths are likely to be family doctors or surgeons, and unlike chiropractors they prescribe medication. Some people seek out osteopaths as their primary doctors in the hopes that they will receive a more "holistic" approach to care;

however, as with other professions, an osteopath's treatment approach and philosophy, though based in modern science, will vary according to each practitioner's personality and approach to patient care.

Physical Therapy. Physical Therapists typically complete a graduate program to gain the P.T. degree; however, a growing number of providers are achieving a masters (M.P.T.) or even doctoral (D.P.T.) level of expertise. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Physical Therapists "help restore function, improve mobility, relieve pain, and prevent or limit permanent physical disabilities of patients suffering from injuries or disease." There are very roughly 100,000 P.T.'s and/or D.P.T.'s in the United States. Physical therapists in Virginia are not regulated by the Board of Medicine; instead, they have their own independent board. With a few exceptions, they typically work under the referral and/or supervision of an M.D., D.O., chiropractor, or other provider. If you've had a joint replacement, for example, you'll probably end up with a P.T. referral.

Physical therapists use the referring provider's diagnosis as a starting point for honing an assessment of a patient's needs. P.T.'s typically use exercise and "modalities" such as electrical stimulation, heat, and ultrasound to assist in healing and return to function. They typically do not perform chiropractic-like spinal manipulation. Some of those who recognize the value of spinal manipulation will return to school for a doctor of chiropractic (D.C.) degree; however, D.C./P.T.'s are relatively rare, in no small part due to the tremendous amount of time and expense involved in obtaining multiple degrees.

Chiropractic. By number of practitioners, chiropractic is the third largest healing discipline in North America, behind allopathic (M.D.) medicine and dentistry. There are roughly 70,000 chiropractors in the United States, and every state formally licenses the profession. In Virginia, the same professional board (the Board of Medicine) regulates chiropractors, M.D.'s, and D.O.'s.

Chiropractors use patient histories and relevant diagnostic testing (x-ray, MRI, lab work) as indicated to render a diagnosis; it is in treatment methods that patients will see a difference between chiropractors and most other practitioners. Chiropractic is uniquely focused on the role of the spine and nervous system in health and healing. The term chiropractic literally means "hand practice," and most chiropractors adjust the spine and related structures by hand to influence health. Chiropractors may also use physical therapy methods, and special chiropractic techniques may stretch or gently stimulate the spine; but it is spinal manipulation, done by hand, which is the hallmark of most chiropractors. In Virginia and in most states and countries, chiropractors prescribe no medicine and do not perform surgery of any kind. When surgery or drugs are necessary, chiropractors refer to a qualified physician. Doctors of chiropractic have had considerable success helping people manage or overcome neck pain (including whiplash), back pain, headaches, and a variety of other ailments related to disorders of the human frame; however, chiropractors are far more than spine doctors. Some chiropractors earn advanced certifications and fellowships in specialties such as pediatrics, radiology, acupuncture, nutrition, and sports. Most professional sports teams

designate an official or affiliated team chiropractor, and sports chiropractic is of growing interest among recreational athletes and active seniors.

In summary, there are similarities and differences in the major healing professions in North America. All are regulated by licensing boards, and all are covered to varying extents by most insurance carriers (including Medicare) and worker's compensation programs. I would strongly suggest you arm yourself with information so that you can seek out the provider(s) who are right for your unique health goals.

Dr. Shaye is a Fellow of the International Academy of Medical Acupuncture with Performance Chiropractic (www.performancechiropractic.com). He is also a Doctor of Chiropractic, a Certified Chiropractic Sports Physician, and a Certified Chiropractic Rehabilitation Doctor. Though his credentials include D.C., C.C.S.P., C.C.R.D., and F.I.A.M.A., his mother still calls him "Daniel."

RESOURCES:

American Chiropractic Association: <http://amerchiro.org>

American Medical Association: <http://www.ama-assn.org/>

American Osteopathic Association: www.osteopathic.org

American Physical Therapy Association: <http://www.apta.org>