

Meeting the Challenge of Ethical Leadership:

Dr. Andrew Taylor Still, MD, DO

Founder of Osteopathic Medicine

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Introduction

Webster's dictionary defines leadership as "the power to govern others" and ethics as "rules of behavior based on ideas about what is morally good and bad." (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary) Therefore, ethical leaders lead others by exemplifying a moral code of conduct. Leaders who have the capability of being ethical in their markets and fields of expertise require certain skill sets that differentiate them from their peers. They stand out and attain a higher level of accomplishment, entrepreneurship, and integrity.

One such example is Dr. Andrew Taylor Still, MD, DO who in 1892 established the first school of Osteopathy as a direct rebellion of the existing medical practices and principles. He felt the current medical strategies of his day often caused significant harm and conventional medicine had failed to shed light on the etiology and effective treatment of disease. Dr. Still transcended a new way of conducting medicine and ultimately created a new medical organization with different philosophies that has survived the test of time and is now a prominent force in the United States' health delivery system. In this essay, I will expand on the background, ideas, and philosophies of Dr. Still presenting why I believe him to be one of the greatest ethical medical leaders of his era.

Early Days of Dr. Still and Osteopathy

According to his autobiography, Dr. Still was born in Lee County, Virginia in 1828 as the son of a Methodist minister and physician. To note, he was also a staunch abolitionist and was briefly a Kansas politician elected in 1857 and had fought in some of the "Bleeding Kansas" skirmishes on the side of the abolitionist movement. After studying medicine, he became a hospital steward during the Civil War and eventually a practicing surgeon and physician (Still,

1908). At the end of the 19th century, medical practice was very unscientific and non-evidence based, including treatments such as opium, whiskey, and arsenic for common ailments. Also, substandard sterilizations in surgeries accounted for many deaths during this time (Stark, 2012). After the deaths of his wife and 3 children to bacterial meningitis, Dr. Still concluded that current medical doctrine was institutionally and fundamentally flawed because it didn't address mind/body/spirit dimensions, disease prevention, or the body's natural way of healing itself and set out to create a new system utilizing these notions. Ultimately, he established "Osteopathy" in June 1874 (Stark, 2012).

Osteopathy, as written by Dr. Still, has 4 basic tenets: First, the body is a unit and each part performs for the betterment of the whole. Second, the body has self-regulating mechanisms of protection against outside forces such as toxic substances, illness, or injury and can be compensated by the the other parts. Third, structure and function are reciprocally interrelated. Dr. Still noted that the musculoskeletal system is the principal system in the body and can cause significant impairment in function if not addressed. Lastly, rational treatment of a patient consists of utilizing these three principles (Still, 1908).

American School of Osteopathy and the Evolution of Osteopathic Medicine

The American School of Osteopathy (ASO) was first opened in 1892 in Kirksville, Missouri, founded in a two-room frame building. The first class of 5 women and 16 men, including three of Dr. Still's children and one of his nephews, graduated in 1894. By 1895 the enrollment at ASO had tripled in comparison (Booth, 1924). At this time, medical education to women and African Americans were rare, accounting for a very small percentage of physicians.

In his book, Dr. Still had always advocated the inclusion of women and minorities in medicine and offered enrollment based on merit not gender or race (Still, 1908).

Soon after, other Osteopathic medical schools were founded and continue to be founded today. According to The American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM) there are currently 31 accredited colleges of osteopathic medicine in the United States. These colleges are accredited to deliver instruction at 44 teaching locations in 29 states. 6 of the colleges are publicly controlled, 25 are private institutions. Today, DOs provide comprehensive medical care to patients in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and have unlimited practice rights in more than 65 countries. Currently, there are more than 74,000 DO's practicing in the United States in a wide range of medical specialties including surgery, anesthesiology, sports medicine, geriatrics, and emergency medicine. In the 2014-15 academic year, colleges are educating over 24,600 future Osteopathic physicians, more than 20 percent of U.S. medical students (AACOM). According to the American Osteopathic Association, by the year 2016, more than 100,000 Osteopathic physicians are expected to be in active medical practice (AOA).

Introspective

So why were Osteopathic medical values and the profession as a whole sustainable when other minor subdivisions of medicine, such as homeopathy for example, failed? The answer is that they did not have a truly ethical leader with the same entrepreneurship, moral convictions, and marketing/lobbying sense as Dr. Andrew Taylor Still. His vision of a more holistic and empathetic medical structure, one that does not focus primarily on disease management but rather on the patient as a whole and disease prevention was innovative in his time and still remains today. Health care delivery is a product similar to other products like iPhones or

automobiles, and he saw a need to produce a superior product than the competition and make it accessible to the masses across the US.

Dr. Still's humanistic compassion is still thriving. Today, more Osteopathic physicians are practicing in underserved rural and urban areas compared to their Allopathic peers and more go into a much needed primary care specialty which is the focus of much of the Osteopathic college curriculum. Also, Dr. Still's Osteopathic Tenets and philosophies are lectured on immediately on the first day of class, or at least it was for me.

On a macro scale, individuals who can bring about change to what they perceive to be a flawed complex system are quite rare. The system may have strong guarded entry barriers such as medical orthodoxy that can seem insurmountable. Change is trying for all involved and takes a significant amount of courage. Innovation from scratch takes daring, commitment, and a real passion for the end goal, regardless whether it is a new small business opening its doors for the first time or a change in age-old principles in medicine.

Dr. Still's humanitarian passion for improving the existing state of medicine in this country inspired countless others to continue to improve the details of the system. Currently both Allopathic and Osteopathic physicians now utilize an evidence based treatment model using scientific methods in an objective fashion to optimize their patients' health and control cost. I, personally, was inspired by his philosophies and love of a patient and decided that Osteopathic school was a better fit for me and my career. I hope to continue to express this level of and commitment in not only my day-to-day patient, family, and administrative encounters but also my business education and career.

Change does not come without some degree of hostility and it takes a true leader to persevere through difficult times. Dr. Still encountered much backlash from the orthodox medical community of his era. For a period of time, Osteopathic physicians were not legally able to be licensed in many states and were frequently denied medical staff privileges at hospitals. The federal government did not even recognize Osteopathic physicians as medical professionals until the Vietnam War. Only since 1969, the American Medical Association (AMA) approved a measure allowing qualified Osteopathic physicians as full and active members (American Medical Association).

Concepts that are truly sustainable are ones that have an unquestionable “truth” to them that is not breakable over time. They do not flux or flutter with the changing market. There is an ethical basis of thought and product which can be continually improved upon. Dr. Still and Osteopathic medicine served a need that was just and necessary with a simple concept: to improve patients' health and not just find disease. He also radically changed an established complex healthcare system that was thought to be unchangeable, adding a sustainable and thriving brand and he did so by putting patients’ needs for safe, effective, reliable treatment above the bureaucracy of his time. This makes Dr. Andrew Taylor Still, MD, DO an elite ethical leader. He famously said, “Let us not be governed today by what we did yesterday, nor tomorrow by what we do today, for day by day we must show progress (Still, 1908).”

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