

The Gentle Touch of Cranial Osteopathy

In the early 1970s, I met a remarkable osteopathic physician named Robert Fulford here in Tucson. Dr. Fulford was a leading practitioner of cranial osteopathy, a healing method in which gentle pressure is applied with the hands to the head and other areas of the body. One of several osteopathic manipulation techniques, it's based on the idea that the central nervous system (including the brain and spinal cord) has subtle, rhythmic pulsations that are key to health, and can be detected and regulated by a skilled practitioner.

I still consider Dr. Fulford (who died in 1997 at the age of 91) the most effective clinician and healer I've ever known. He relied upon hands-on manipulation alone to treat a variety of diseases and gave no drugs. Dr. Fulford had great success using cranial osteopathy for many problems that hadn't responded to conventional medicine. For instance, he was often able to permanently end cycles of recurrent ear infections in children with a single session of treatment.

Practitioners of cranial osteopathy use their hands to gently free up restrictions in the movement of cranial bones and to stimulate the flow of the cerebrospinal fluid, which bathes the surfaces of the brain and the spinal cord. According to Dr. Fulford, distortions in the natural rhythms of the central nervous system may result from trauma of all sorts: birth trauma, childhood injuries, car accidents, even psychological trauma. Because the nervous system regulates all other organs, any impairment in its function could affect your health.

For decades, mainstream medicine dismissed the notion that the cranial bones could move, an idea first put forth in the late 1930s by osteopath William Sutherland. However, researchers at Michigan State University's College of Osteopathic Medicine confirmed Sutherland's theory in the 1970s by showing cranial motion in x-ray movies of living skulls.

A Safe and Effective Technique

In my experience, cranial osteopathy is extremely useful for a wide range of problems. Besides ear infections, I've seen it benefit asthma, sleep disorders, migraines, Meniere's disease, and TMJ syndrome. It may also be helpful with pediatric conditions such as colic, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and even learning disabilities. Because of its gentle nature, cranial osteopathy is generally quite safe. However, its use directly on the cranium isn't recommended for patients who have just had a stroke or skull fracture.

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At our Integrative Medicine Clinic at the University of Arizona, we often refer patients to osteopathic physicians (DOs) trained in cranial osteopathy, including Tucson-based osteopath Theresa Cisler, who studied with Dr. Fulford. We're also collaborating on a new study at the NIH-funded Pediatric Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine here at the university on cranial osteopathy and echnacea to break cycles of recurrent ear infections in children.

During a typical cranial-osteopathy session with a DO trained in the technique, you may be asked about your history of injuries and the circumstances of your birth, in addition to the usual questions about your symptoms, medical history, and lifestyle habits. As part of the physical exam, the practitioner may move your limbs and feel your spine, rib cage, and cranium to check for areas of restricted motion. Treatment includes gentle hands-on manipulation of the cranial bones and the sacrum (tailbone), as well as other restricted areas of the body. The practitioner may use other osteopathic manipulation techniques as well, for example to relax muscles around the joints and spine.

The overall effect of a treatment session is very calming, says Dr. Cisler. During the session, some patients report feeling a pleasant tingling sensation throughout the body as the nervous system begins to function more smoothly. The initial visit may last 45 minutes to an hour, and any subsequent visits may last about 30 minutes. Check with your health plan to see if it covers osteopathic manipulation.

All osteopathic physicians are trained in manipulative medicine, but only a minority use manipulation as a primary treatment. Most of these practitioners have training in cranial osteopathy. A very small number of MDs and dentists also have training in this technique. I'm pleased that the number of DOs who practice cranial osteopathy is on the rise.

Some massage therapists and physical therapists practice what's called craniosacral therapy. Their training isn't as comprehensive as that of DOs, who as physicians can diagnose and treat the full spectrum of health conditions. ☺

To find a practitioner of cranial osteopathy in your area, send an SASE to The Cranial Academy, 8202 Clearvista Parkway #9-D, Indianapolis IN 46256.

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