

Lessons from the Great Flu Pandemic of 1917-1918

What the Great Flu Pandemic of 1917-1918 Tells Us: Chiropractic Saves Lives

Although we are well into the spring season, memories of the swine flu scare of last winter—and of the bird flu outbreak prior to that—have not long been forgotten. The most virulent and potent strains of influenza can pose serious health risks, and an immune system compromised by flu can leave one vulnerable to other dangerous diseases like pneumonia.

That is what seems to have happened during the legendary Great Flu Pandemic of 1917-1918. This global outbreak claimed the lives of millions of people. Different sources estimate the death toll at 10 to 20 *million*. It's staggering to think that almost 1.5 times as many people died in 6 months as did WWI in the course of 4 years.

One good thing to come out of this horrible health crisis was evidence of the life-saving potential of osteopathic and chiropractic methods. (Osteopathy, which started in 1874, and chiropractic, which began in 1898, use many of the same manipulative techniques, although the two communities which practice them diverge in their medical philosophy.)

But the success of their shared manipulative techniques is what is highlighted in a May 2000 article, "Osteopathic Methods and the Great Flu Pandemic of 1917-1918" published in the *Journal of the American Osteopathy Association* by JAOA Associate Editor Michael Patterson, PhD.

Patterson summarizes the role of osteopathic physicians in response to the historical pandemic: "The osteopathic medical community treated patients with influenza and its more potent sequela, pneumonia, with various forms of manipulative treatment, rest, and hydration. After the death sweep had abated, the leaders of the profession surveyed osteopathic practitioners nationwide regarding their experiences with treatment."

The results were astounding. Patients given spinal manipulations or adjustments had a much lower death rate (0.5%) compared to patients treated medically (6% average death rate, up to 27% in Boston). And in cases of pneumonia, patients under osteopathic care "had a death rate of less than 10%, as opposed to 33% of medically treated cases."

An August 1919 JAOA article ("Osteopathic success in the treatment of influenza and pneumonia") by George W. Riley reports that practically none of the patients receiving more or less regular osteopathic treatments at the time of the epidemic contracted these diseases, as reported by their osteopathic physicians. Riley notes: "In their opinion, the resistance of such patients was up to such a level that they will be able to withstand the infection of the epidemic."

That success made Riley celebrate Dr. Still, who started osteopathy in 1874. "If we as a profession had never accomplished anything else than what we did in these epidemics, that alone would be sufficient to make the name of doctor Still immortal."

The many chiropractors who cared for patients during the 1917-1918 flu epidemic to similar success are also celebrated by their contemporary counterparts, who would agree with Patterson's words: "the best defense against disease and infection remains health. Optimal health is the result of the optimization of the function of each individual."

Chiropractors would also agree with his statement that "intelligently applied manipulations" as a part of regular care can be considered "excellent disease prevention."

Reference: Patterson, Michael. "Osteopathic Methods and the Great Flu Pandemic of 1917-1918." JAOA Vol. 100, No. 5 (May 2000): pp. 309-328

Reference: Riley, George W. "Osteopathic success in the treatment of influenza and pneumonia." JAOA Vol. 100, No. 5 (August 1919): pp. 315