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Osteopathy and the Pandemic of 1918

by Robyn Oro on April 7th, 2020



Pictured are soldiers at Camp Funston Hospital on the Fort Riley military base near Junction city, Kansas. The first cases of the deadly influenza outbreak in the United States were recorded there March 4, 1918, with 500 soldiers hospitalized within a week. Troops from this base were sent overseas to fight in the first World War taking the virus with them.¹

There's not a consensus regarding where the virus originated. At about the same time as the outbreak in Kansas, there were reports of the virus in northern France at the huge army camp of 100,000 soldiers at Etaples. The well and wounded moved through the camp bringing with them geese, chickens, ducks, and even pigs purchased at local markets. It was thought the animals could have been intermediaries for the transmission of the virus. More recent analysis suggests it was largely of avian origin.²

At any rate, by the end of the pandemic, 500 million people, or a third of the world's population, became infected. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million, with about 675,000 in the United States.³

This photo shows patients at U. S. Army Hospital Number 30, Royat, France at a movie showing. They were wearing face masks but social distancing had not been put into practice.

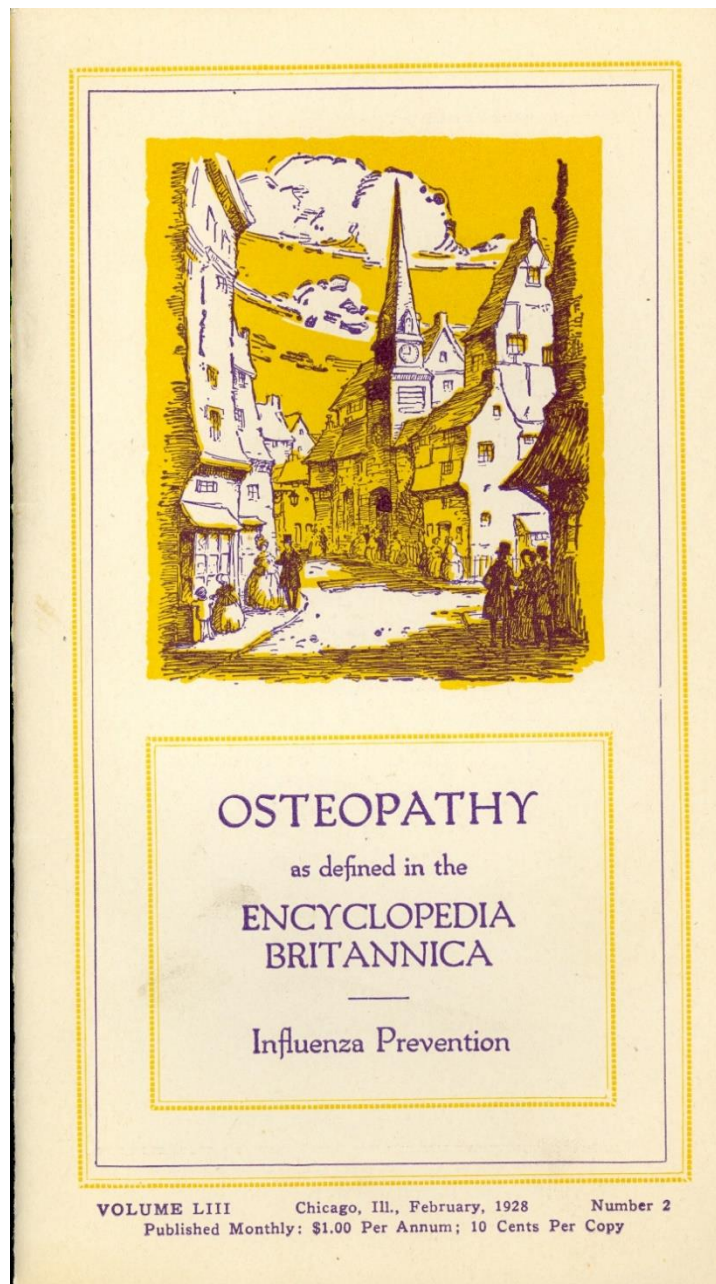


Unlike allopathic physicians, DOs were denied military commissions during the war and many stayed on the home front filling the gaps left by MDs and having some successes treating influenza patients. With A. T. Still deceased by 1918, his great nephew, Dr. George Still, vice-president of the American School of Osteopathy (ASO), and chief of staff at the ASO Hospital, took charge of caring for patients and preventing the spread of the virus in Kirksville, Missouri. The Theta Psi fraternity house was turned into the Red Cross Contagion Hospital on November 16, 1918. Dr. Still was firm in handling the flu cases to prevent them from spreading and was unwavering in limiting visitors and isolating patients and staff. If possible, patients were treated in their homes. No flu patients were allowed in the ASO Hospital, and doctors and attendants were not allowed to work in both hospitals. In the short time the Red Cross Contagion Hospital was open it only recorded one fatality, a young girl who had been ill eight days before admittance.

The classes at ASO were dismissed early in December, 1918, and the two upper classes volunteered to make house calls. Sixty six students cared for 1,114 cases, 41 with pneumonia, often giving the patients two manipulative treatments (known at the time as "rib raising") a day. There were only six fatalities in the Kirksville community.⁴

Since DOs around the nation were reporting success treating the influenza, the American Osteopathic Association sent out a survey to gather statistics. 2445 DOs responded. Out of 110,122 influenza patients treated only 257 died, for a mortality rate of 0.25%. In contrast the mortality rates for influenza at allopathic hospitals ran about 30% with some hospitals in New York reporting as high as 68%.⁵

What accounted for the difference? Allopathic physicians gave influenza patients aspirin treating their fever as a symptom, rather than the body's response to infection. Also, DOs used gentle OMT to relieve respiratory distress.⁶



This issue of *Osteopathic Health* from the D'Angelo Library Archives, gives advice on influenza prevention. Dr. C. J. Gaddis's advice is as valuable now as it was then, "Wash your hands frequently, then keep your fingers off your face, don't shake hands, and avoid 'lip greetings'".⁷

Notes

1. <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/flu-pandemic-of-1918/17805>

2. Haxton, J. "Influenza Pandemic Challenged the Osteopathic Profession." *Now & Then*. Spring 2006.
3. [cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm)
4. Walter, G. W. *The First School of Osteopathic Medicine*. Kirksville, MO: The Thomas Jefferson University Press of Northwest State University; 1992.
5. Ibid.
6. Magoun, H. "More About the Use of OMT During Influenza Epidemics." *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*. 2004;10:406-407.
7. Gaddis, C. J. "Influenza Prevention." *Osteopathic Health*. 1928;53:11.

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