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## Osteopathy Proves Effective for Back Pain

By ALISHA BERGER

One of every five Americans suffers from lower back pain, and the experience can be debilitating. Often, victims cannot drive long distances, hold their children or even walk.

Now, researchers in Chicago report that a nontraditional therapy for back pain seems to work as well as more common treatments like analgesics and physical therapy, with fewer drugs.

The treatment is osteopathic manipulation, the complex set of musculoskeletal techniques used by osteopathic physicians. The study, which appeared in *The New England Journal of Medicine* on Nov. 4, involved 155 patients who said they had been having lower back pain for three weeks to six months; 83 were given osteopathic manipulation and 72 received standard treatments.

"We found that most patients improved," said the lead researcher, Dr. Gunnar B. J. Andersson, the chairman of the department of orthopedic surgery at Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center in Chicago, who is a physician but not an osteopath. "There was no difference in improvement between standard care and osteopathic care, and the patients who had received osteopathic care had received less medication, less physical therapy."

More than 90 percent of the patients in each group reported being satisfied with their treatments. "I think it's very hopeful for patients with back pain," Dr. Andersson said. "Contrary to what many people believe, if they've had back pain for a month or more, it won't last forever. Those who prefer traditional treatments can get it, and those who prefer manipulation can do that."

Asked for a definition of osteopathic manipulative treatment, or O.M.T., Dr. Boyd R. Buser, associate dean at the University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine in Biddeford, Me., said it "means more than getting your back cracked."

"There are techniques as simple as kneading and stretching and as complex as subtle motions that affect the movement of fluid from one area of the body to the other," he said. "The goal is to lengthen abnormally shortened muscles and enable the joints to have a more normal range of motion."

Dr. Buser, who was not involved in the study, said its finding about a reduced need for medication was important because some drugs for back pain bring adverse effects, the most common being gastrointestinal bleeding and upset stomachs.

The study did not deal with chiropractic care, which also involves spinal manipulation. Dr. Robert E. Kappler, an osteopath who contributed to the study, said an osteopath had a wider spectrum of techniques than a chiropractor.

Dr. Kappler cautioned: "Manipulation doesn't work for everything. If you have a weak back, manipulation doesn't strengthen it. Sometimes the pain is chronic and manipulation doesn't work."

He is disappointed by the study, he said, because he believes O.M.T. is better than standard medical care.

"There weren't enough patients in the study to show that," Dr. Kappler said, "but it will come out in future research."