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# Osteopathy and Massage Therapy: A comparison of their similarities and differences

Thesis

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## Introduction

We live in a society far more open to “different or alternative ways of doing things”, this includes the way in which we approach healthcare. Today people are realizing that they need to be more responsible for their own healthcare and informed of the many ways to go about that. There is a strong emergence and acceptance of alternative and complementary therapies as a form of relief from pain and dysfunction, rather than seeking help from the family doctor, who will most often prescribe a pain killer, muscle relaxant or NSAID, people are looking to utilize manual therapies such as osteopathic manipulation and massage therapy. The purpose of this paper is to look at the differences and similarities between the professions of osteopathy and massage therapy. It is not to judge or determine the efficacy or superiority of one field over the other. It is more of a comparison. As you read the paper it will become apparent that there seems to be more in the way of similarities in the sense that both disciplines have common ground in their strive to eliminate pain restore or improve function and enhance an individuals’ health and well-being. These therapies include a broad range of component that may have different meanings and interpretations across geographical areas. The scope of practice varies according to the country and so for this reason we will only look at Osteopathic Manipulative Practitioners and Registered Massage Therapists (RMT) in Canada. This paper will cover topics that show the comparison of the two professions, including a definition, a look at the code of ethics, a brief history and a direct comparison of the similarities and differences.

## What is Osteopathy

While there is no one set definition of osteopathy there are a common descriptions of the field. It seems that Osteopathy is much more than the application of particular techniques, it is also described by it's patient centred care, which is essentially an approach to healthcare consultation in which the patients expectations and preferences are integrated with the practitioners clinical expertise and experience. "Osteopaths use a variety of hands on physical treatments. These include soft tissue tech, joint mobilizations and manipulations. These techniques are normally employed together with exercise, dietary and occupational advice in an attempt to help patients recover from pain disease and injury" (NAO website).

Osteopathy is a natural medicine and science that treats the whole person. It requires extensive study of anatomy and physiology. The principles of osteopathy are based on the relationship between structure and function and understanding the connections between all the tissues, fluids and systems of the body.

## What is Massage Therapy

Massage therapy is a therapeutic, integral healing relationship in which the therapist assists the client in restoring, maintaining and enhancing the well-being of the client. The practice of massage therapy is: "The assessment of the soft tissue and joints of the body and the treatment and prevention of physical dysfunction and pain of the soft tissues and joints by manipulation to develop, maintain, rehabilitate or augment physical function or relieve pain" (Massage Therapy Act 1991) There are multiple (to-date, approximately 80) hands-on techniques and modalities that fall under a massage therapists scope of practice.

"It is no coincidence that four of the six letters in "health" are "heal" (Ed Northstrum)

## Basic Code of Ethics

There are definitive principles for practice that fall under the Code of Ethics for massage therapy, they are as follows;

- \*Respect for persons – to value the dignity and worth of all persons.
- \*Responsible caring – to provide sensitive, compassionate and empathetic quality massage therapy.
- \*Integrity in relationships – to practice with integrity, honesty and diligence in professional relationships with ourselves, clients, colleagues and society.
- \*Responsibility to society – to be accountable to society and conduct ourselves in a manner that fosters and promotes high ethical standards.

The code of ethics pertaining to osteopathic practitioners in Canada does not have a set of principles for practice like massage therapy does but has a broader spectrum, the following is a summarization;

- \*Professional conduct and responsibilities – which is to provide optimal levels of osteopathic services and demonstrate excellence in practice by promoting a patients health and wellbeing.
- \*Abiding by law.
- \*Confidentiality.
- \*Integrity – the osteopathic practitioner should practice with honesty, integrity and lawfulness.
- \*Competences – the therapist must perform testing, assessment and services for which they are competent.
- \*Patient-Professional relationship – the therapist will value the well-being pf patients over their own personal interests and take reasonable steps to minimize risk to patients and prevent harm.

### How it all began, a brief history:

Both professions have a long standing history of existence. Massage therapy has deep roots in ancient history as far back as 2330bc. Civilizations in both the east and west including China, India, Rome and Greece found that natural healing including massage therapy could heal injuries relive pain and prevent or cure illness. It was believed that illness and diseases were due to a deficiency or imbalance in the energy pathways within the body. Massage therapy was used to allow the energy to flow freely and thus allowing the body to heal itself naturally.

Osteopathy dates back 1874 as a result of the work of Dr. Andrew Still (1828-1917) he believed that all things needed to sustain human life was already present within the human body. He focused on self-regulation and self-healing of the body. This was done through eliminating “mechanical blockages” and allowing the free flow of fluid using a range of manual techniques. His work was toward a parallel yet distinct approach to medicine. Today osteopathy is widely used as a non-medical approach, mainly focussed on treating the bodies’ somatic dysfunctions which are said to be the result of things such as restriction of normal range of motion, complaints of pain, changes in tissue tone and asymmetry.

“Natural forces within us are the true healers of disease.” (Hippocrates, 460 BC – 377 BC)

### Some similarities and differences

First, I feel it is important to mention a common ground among all healthcare practitioners, that being the “therapeutic relationship”. This is the relationship between the therapist and the patient/client in which the therapist provides services/treatments that are of benefit to the patient. We agree to act in the clients best interest and be accountable for our actions. We also educate the patient of the importance to comply with the agreed upon treatment plans. The quality of the therapeutic relationship is based on a number of factors including ethical behaviour, interpersonal skills which allow us the ability to effectively communicate each persons’ roles and expectations, additionally our ability to gather the appropriate information regarding the patients’ health history, previous and present physical status will make for a balanced patient centered treatment that will be done repeatedly if/when necessary. This similarity is perhaps the most important.

Although Osteopathic principles do exist, they are arguably vague and underdeveloped and do not clearly distinguish osteopathic practice from other health professions. Instead, they share the same foundations, ideas, principles that other health professions have....making that part a clear similarity. When comparing osteopathy and massage therapy it becomes apparent that there are more similarities than differences, again, reiterating the common goal of the betterment of the patient.

#### Similarities:

-Both professions treat musculoskeletal pain through the use of manual therapy, including soft tissue massage, joint movement, and varying degrees of manipulations. More specifically, the use of active, passive, direct and in-direct techniques. Some of those techniques (that are similar)

include strain-counter-strain, myofascial release, manual lymphatic drainage and facilitated positional releases.

-Academic training involves an extensive knowledge base of human anatomy and many hours of hands-on training must be completed before being eligible to write a board exam and become certified in the field. Both programs offer an accelerated program study time for those that have prior health education

-Each discipline requires a registration number and insurance in order to practice.

-Both are able to work in a group clinic or be a sole practitioner.

-Neither of the disciplines are able to give a medical diagnosis, do independent medical evaluations or perform job-site ergonomic assessments.

-Osteopathic treatment, as well as registered massage therapy are both widely accepted by most insurance companies (extended health benefits)

-Both disciplines are considered to be a form of natural medicine, which can be defined as “any form of healthcare that acknowledges and relies on the body’s natural ability to heal itself.”

-Additionally, Osteopathic manipulative practitioners and registered massage therapists both act as an important part of a multi-disciplinary team where patient centred care is priority.

Differences:

In Canada (Ontario), Osteopathic practitioners do not have one solitary college or association like most other health professions do. The importance of having these regulatory bodies lies in the relevance and credibility of the field, not it’s efficacy. This is perhaps the biggest difference between the two fields. At this stage in Canada, Osteopathic practitioners are not considered a regulated health professional and therefore do not fall under the “regulated health professionals act” which is as follows;

“The Regulated Health Professional Act (RHPA) provides a framework for regulating the scope of practice of 23 health professions in Ontario, under their respective regulatory Colleges. It includes a General Act, a Procedural Code for all the regulated health professions, and profession-specific Acts. The RHPA outlines the manner in which Colleges operate with regard to health care professionals. The Act also regulates the manner in which Colleges are to deal with complaints against a health professional. Colleges are responsible for: regulating the practice of a health profession, developing and maintaining standards of qualification for those who apply for certificates of registration; and developing and maintaining standards of professional practice, knowledge, skill and professional ethics for its members.” (RHPA, 1991)

This act is what unifies a profession. It is important on many levels. For the profession it provides greater influence and recognition. It provides one unified voice. For the public, it provides high and consistent ethical and practice standards. For its members, it provides consistency across the board regarding rules and regulations and protection of their particular designation. The current “fragmented” structure of the osteopathic associations unfortunately means there is a lack of consistency, public recognition and uniformity.

-Another difference lies in the treatment approach of an osteopathic manipulative practitioner vs a registered massage therapist.

The RMT tends to treat more symptomatically by applying techniques to the symptomatic tissues without a working diagnosis or objective other than reducing that particular muscle tone and hopefully allowing for a decrease in pain and increased range of motion. By contrast, the Osteopathic practitioner has a more systemic approach. This is done by a more thorough assessment of tissues and health history. For example, an osteopathic assessment would include looking at a history of breathing pattern disorders such as asthma, trauma, dental work, anxiety, posture and pre-existing musculoskeletal injuries in the diagnosis and treatment of the neck. Thus, making the osteopathic approach more systemic rather than symptomatic.

-Osteopathic practitioners are able to give a manual diagnosis whereas massage therapists cannot.

-According to many independent studies, the average annual income for an osteopathic practitioner seems to be between \$20,000 - \$30,000 higher than a massage therapists.

-Treatment techniques that differ from massage techniques include Muscle Energy Technique, osteopathic articular technique, visceral manipulation and cranial osteopathy. These types of techniques require very specific training and are part of what separates an osteopathic practitioner from most other disciplines.

## Final Words

There are undoubtedly numerous similarities between an osteopathic practitioner and a massage therapist yet each serves their own purpose in the pursuit of moving a person towards better health. The approaches to treatment may differ but the motivation behind them remains the same.

I will conclude with two quotes that I consider to be some “food for thought”. I will encourage you to apply your knowledge and understanding of what a practitioner does, read, analyze, dissect, understand, agree, disagree or question both of them. Although they are from two separate sources, I feel they work well as one.

“the body of a man is God’s drugstore and has in it all liquids, drugs, lubricating oils, opiates, acids and anti-acids and every sort of drug that the wisdom of God thought necessary for human happiness and health” (Andrew Taylor Still, D.O.)

“our bodies communicate to us clearly and specifically, if we are willing to listen” (Shakti Gowain)



## Resources

Autobiography of A.T. Still, “With a history of the development of the science of Osteopathy”.  
Revised edition, 1908.

Regulated Health Professionals Act, 1991

Massage Therapy Act, 1991

National Academy of Osteopathy (NAO) website

College of Massage Therapists of Ontario (CMTO) website

“Osteopathic principles in the modern world”, International Journal of Osteopathic Medicine