

Not That Old a Dog ...

Category: My Aching Back

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I don't know how to share this without sounding like I am bragging. Maybe I *am* bragging – but not about my ability. I am proud that I learned a skill not usually taught to MDs. A while ago, a long-held interest in massage led me to learn more bodywork; then I worked with a DO, a doctor of osteopathy. I would feel someone's back and say to my DO colleague, "Mike, I think she's out here." Mike would feel and grudgingly reply, "Pretty good hands for an MD." He would then do osteopathic manipulation therapy (OMT), and the person would feel better – immediately! I thought, "You get to fix people? I want to fix people!"

So I kept learning from colleagues, including my own residents, and eventually I got more complete OMT training. There have been interesting moments, like when a new patient who had pain in her upper back that would not yield to massage or physical therapy came to see me. I worked on her for about five minutes, and then she sat up, stared at me, and declared, "You're not a doctor." Do you know how your brain can fill in many different endings to a statement in the pause that follows a sentence like that? My throat tightened as I imagined all the ways this could go badly. Then she concluded, "You're a magician." Phew!

But the point is it's *not* magic. I now teach OMT to my family medicine residents, stressing what they can do safely without more training. They see patients with me, and it's gratifying when they can help treat and see – and feel – improvement. Sometimes it's dramatic. One patient left holding up her cane, proclaiming, "I don't need this anymore!" I wish I had filmed that! Sometimes it's just patients experiencing less pain. Sometimes it's helping patients understand their issue and how to address it themselves. Almost everyone appreciates that we have laid hands on them and tried to help in a concrete way. It's often the win I need to get through my day – and I am thrilled to offer that to my learners.

The part that makes me most proud and grateful is the objective evidence that we can keep learning new ways to help. Family medicine is never boring, but is sometimes daunting. Knowing that I can keep finding (and teaching) new approaches makes me grateful and proud. And it's hard to beat a patient walking straight without her cane!

Andrea Gordon

Melrose, Massachusetts