Where our students came from

For the 1999–2000 academic year, the number of first-year students in the 19 colleges of osteopathic medicine was 2848. In May, about 2304 new osteopathic physicians are expected to graduate from these same schools. The osteopathic profession is growing at an unprecedented rate, especially when viewed as percentage growth. This is a fairly recent trend. This month’s history review highlights the trends in student populations during a span of 30 years, from about 1931 to 1961.

At the profession’s inception, the first class filled a small one-room schoolhouse. Soon, a new building was erected in Kirksville, Missouri, to house the American School of Osteopathy (ASO) and its infirmary. By the turn of the century, the ASO was one of the largest schools of healing arts in the nation. It was joined by many small, proprietary schools that sprang up around the nation. The reforms in response to the Flexner report of the 1910s resulted in the demise of many of these schools, as was the case with many allopathic medical schools. By 1930, with the closing of the Massachusetts college, the profession boasted six colleges, now known as the “original schools.” This situation prevailed until 1962. Then, the Los Angeles College of Physicians and Surgeons was converted to an allopathic medical school during the “California crisis,” when the granting of new licenses to DOs was prohibited by a California public referendum. In 1969, the first of the new schools opened in Pontiac, Michigan, to be followed by nine more new schools during the 1970s. Since that time, four more schools have opened. Thus, the profession’s undergraduate educational plant has expanded tremendously after a long period of stagnation and even shrinkage.

What did the student population look like during this time of no growth in the educational plant? The first survey report was written by Asa Willard, DO, in 1932 and covered the period from 1927 to 1932. In 1927, there were 1642 students total in the seven (including Massachusetts) schools. In 1931–1932, there were 1750, up 100 from 1929. Perhaps the Great Crash of 1929 was good for the profession (will applicants go up next year?). Willard gives interesting statistics on school and state bases, remarking that the low student numbers from the southern states may show that osteopathy is too strenuous for those from warm climates. (We in Florida think that has been decisively disproved). He also points out that, proportionately, Montana was doing the best job of sending students into osteopathic medicine.

The second article was written by Willard in 1948 and gives statistics from 1927 to 1948. In 1945, only 556 students were enrolled in the six osteopathic medical schools! World War II had a decidedly negative impact on osteopathic medical school enrollments. By 1947, however, enrollments had risen to 1184 as the veterans began to seek higher education. Willard points out that in 1947, osteopathic medical schools graduated only 162 new DOs, and would graduate only 140 in 1948, less than the number of DOs who would die during that time. In other words, if the profession were to survive, it would have to recruit more students. Again, Willard tabulates students by state, country, and school, with interesting comparisons of students by state and foreign country.

In the third article, written in 1962, Lawrence W. Mils, then director of the Office of Education of the American Osteopathic Association, summarizes the state of osteopathic undergraduate enrollment. He notes that the Los Angeles College of Osteopathic Physicians and Surgeons trustees had recently voted to convert it to an M D degree-granting institution. He noted that since 1951, the enrollment at the six osteopathic medical schools had remained stable at around 1900 and that in the spring of 1961, 506 new osteopathic physicians had been graduated. The profession was mounting an effort to recruit more students. Mills also provides a summary of all the undergraduate schools from which osteopathic medical students had graduated. Michigan was shown to have the most first-year students in both 1960 and 1961, and 70% of osteopathic medical students in the first-year classes came from just six states.

In 1962, the profession was struggling to attract more students. With the merger of the California allopathic and osteopathic medical professions imminent, the future was uncertain. Michigan led the way in attracting students to the profession through intensive efforts to interest students in osteopathic medicine. Later, they led the way for the resurgence of the new schools. The data contained in these articles illuminates a time of struggle, decreasing enrollments, and finally stasis in the educational plants of the profession. The brush with professional death in 1962 led the profession to a new era and renewed vigor. The student numbers are now growing. What will a reprise of student demographics show about the osteopathic medical profession 100 years from now?

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