

# Functional Medicine for a Functional Force

Military healthcare and readiness

by LtCol L. Terrell "OC" Watts

**A** functional medicine approach to military healthcare is the next progressive step toward ensuring the readiness of the force. For many, if you were like me a year ago, when I started to experience what I believed were just signs of aging, you may have never heard of functional or integrative medicine. Terminology such as allopathic or osteopathic may be completely foreign to you unless you happen to be one of our many great military medical professionals. If we truly want to maintain a healthy and ready force, I argue that these terms should become part of the normal lexicon and practice within military health care. If you experience difficulty sleeping, joint pains, brain fog, high blood pressure, or any other number of physiological or psychological issues, the great news is functional medicine and nutrition may be able to put your body back into a state of overall wellness.

Too many service members spend their days suffering in silence because our allopathic approach to medicine fails to get to the ailment's root cause. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* definition of allopathic is "relating to or being a system of medicine that aims to combat disease by using remedies (such as drugs or surgery), which produce effects that are different from or incompatible with those of the disease being treated." I argue allopathic, or western medicine, plays a critical role in military medicine when it comes to acute injuries that commonly occur in combat. If someone breaks a limb, has a head trauma, or any number of injuries, we need specialized medical

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professionals capable of stabilizing and treating those injuries at the moment to ensure survival and eventual recovery. Allopathic medicine has its place but not to the exclusion of all else. The problems that lead to life-long suffering come post-initial injury or once a disease has set in well enough to manifest active symptoms. If the medical establishment (i.e., medical schools, institutions,

which degradation in one part creates problems throughout the entire mind/body system. In order to ensure excellent health, the entire human mind/body has to function properly. If you were to talk to a doctor of osteopathic medicine, they would tell you that the body has a phenomenal ability to heal itself if you can get to the root cause of disease or disability and fix it. In our current medical system, we typically do not fix root causal factors; instead, treat symptoms with medication and accept that the body has to adapt to the problem vice repair itself. Medication serves a role but imagine a world in which the body heals permanently because we remove the factors that inhibit healthy internal functionality.

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legislation, and policies, etc.) broadens its perspective on an evolutionary way of thinking, training, and practicing a more osteopathic approach, we can optimize medicine to promote healing and longevity.

The *Merriam-Webster* definition of osteopathy is "a system of medical practice based on a theory that diseases are due chiefly to loss of structural integrity, which can be restored by manipulation of the part and/or supplemented by therapeutic measures (such as, use of drugs or surgery)." In layperson's terms, the human body is a complex system in

From my personal experience throughout the last 21 years in the Marine Corps, I can definitely say holistic healing is possible and not difficult to accomplish. Fifteen years ago, while undergoing Officer Candidate School, well-intentioned medical providers gave me medication to control the blood pressure issues I was having during training. At the time, I was told that I was healthy and already living a good lifestyle so medication was the only option. Fast forward fourteen years, and while dealing with other health issues, I developed a professional



**An osteopathic physician at Naval Hospital, Jacksonville, provides an alternative modality to evaluate and treat patients in a hands-on fashion. (Photo by Jacob Sippel.)**

relationship with a talented civilian, a doctor of osteopathic medicine, who talked to me about the body as a system, the importance of gut health, the microbiome, DNA gene expression, reducing/eliminating chronic inflammation, and toxins in the body in order for the body to start to heal itself on a cellular level. One of the doctor of osteopathic medicine's first recommendations was a diet change aimed at inflammation reduction. In my case, I changed my diet by eliminating gluten and processed foods, reducing sugar intake, and a few other things. A short 48 hours later, my blood pressure went down without medication, and it has remained consistently excellent for over one year now. I just wonder had if any of the military medical professionals I have worked with during the previous fifteen years had taken an osteopathic approach, would I have been healthier in general? In addition to fixing my blood pressure, using food as medicine also fixed my vision issues, joint pains, brain fog, and sleep quality issues that I had simply associated with getting older. If we take a functional medicine approach and focus on health and longevity, getting older does not have to mean deteriorating.

Ponder how many people you are in contact with every day who are dealing

with some sort of ailment that could be fixed if the time was taken to discover the root cause. I have personally talked to Marines who have trouble sleeping, chronic pain, hypertension, and a slew of other issues for which they believe nothing can be done except taking medication that does not always seem to help or worst sometimes invite new symptoms. They may never be introduced to things like Photobiomodulation (Red Light Therapy), Frequency Specific Microcurrent for pain management/elimination, body detoxification for mitochondria health, or food as medicine.<sup>1</sup> If knowledge, and application of that knowledge, is power, then we must empower our health care system and its professionals through functional medicine training to create greater general health within the DOD.

Every year service members are required to do a physical health assessment in which we talk to a doctor about what, if anything, is wrong physically or emotionally. I would offer that part of our yearly evaluations should be a series of tests that look at nutritional levels, toxins, and the diversity of the microbiome, which has a tremendous effect on brain health. We already look at heart health, dental health, visual acuity, and hearing, due to their importance, and so that we have a baseline from which

we can track unhealthy deviation. The additional stool, urine, and blood tests, recommended in an osteopathic approach, would provide further insight. The individual health of each service member would be better assessed and addressed at the yearly physical health assessment conversation with the doctor and would in turn become a more productive means to enhance longevity and health, thus increasing the longevity and fighting strength of our military forces.

As demonstrated by Continuing Medical Education, there is always room for medical professionals and systems to grow and evolve. The military too must evolve in its management of the health of military personnel. My personal story of improved health while dealing with early-onset Parkinson's disease is anecdotal proof from one person that an osteopathic approach works. In the near future, using a functional medicine approach I will be symptom-free. The process of true healing has begun!

#### Notes

1. Ari Whitten, *The Ultimate Guide to Red Light Therapy: How to Use Red Light and Near-Infrared Light Therapy for Anti-Aging, Fat Loss, Muscle Gain, Performance, and Brain Optimization* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018); Michael Hamblin and Ying-Ying Huang, *Photobiomodulation in the Brain Low-Level Laser (Light) Therapy in Neurology and Neuroscience* (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2019); Carolyn McMakin, *The Resonance Effect How Frequency Specific Microcurrent is Changing Medicine* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2017); and Dave Asprey, *Super Human The Bulletproof Plan to Age Backward and Maybe Even Live Forever* (New York: Harper Wave, 2019).



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