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Practice Profile: Ortman Country

by Rich Smith

Established in 1915, the Ortman tradition is alive and kicking in South Dakota

Having patients lay prone is not the only ideal position for adjusting; they also can be worked on quite successfully while seated upright in a chair—precisely as it is done by all nine chiropractors who make up the nationally famous Ortman Clinic in South Dakota.

Called the Ortman Technique, this slightly unorthodox form of musculoskeletal manipulation proves somewhat easier on patients than conventional adjustments because there is less thrusting involved. Practitioners at the clinic rely mainly on thumb action applied to soft tissue areas to loosen muscles and permit out-of-alignment bones to freely slide back into their correct position rather than forcing them into place as conventional adjustments do, says Tom Ortman, DC, an elder of the third generation of his family to provide care at the clinic.

The doctors of Ortman Clinic: (front L–R) Tom Ortman, DC; Lon Weiland, DC; Wayne Ortman, DC; Charles Ortman, DC; Ivan Ortman, DC; (back L–R) Ryan Ortman, DC; Todd Weiland, DC; Jay Ortman, DC, CCSP; Doug Ortman, DC. All nine doctors carry on the tradition of Armon Ortman, DC—the Ortman Technique—who first began practicing in 1915.

The Ortman Technique traces its origin to Ortman family patriarch Amon Ortman, DC, who, in 1915, started treating patients as sort of an informal sideline to farming. In those days, adjusting tables were hard to come by in the middle of prairie country, so Amon Ortman would invite patients dropping by his farmhouse to sit down on anything convenient—a chair, a bucket, a wagon tongue, a buggy seat—and apply his treatment, often with the assistance of his younger brother, Noah Ortman, DC.

Thereafter, the Ortman Technique was handed down from generation to generation of chiropractors bearing the Ortman name (or lineage). Never once did any of them suggest abandoning it in favor of something of a different or more recent vintage.

“We’ve kept it for all this time because it works,” says Lon Weiland, DC, whose mother was a daughter of Amon Ortman. “With the exception of what we were taught and practiced in chiropractic college, the Ortman Technique is the only technique any of us has ever used consistently in actual private practice.”

Word-of-Mouth

In the span of the long decades between the point when Amon Ortman’s practice moved into a clinic proper and today, more than 3 million patients have undergone treatment at the hands of Ortman family members. Many patients today come, as in the past, from South Dakota and neighboring states, but Ortman Clinic records currently list large numbers of health-seekers trekking in from across the entire union, as well as Canada and beyond.

“Most of our nonlocal patients come here because this is their last resort,” says Weiland. “They haven’t gotten the results they hoped for from other interventions closer to where they live, so they come to us and spend a few days or a week here and receive the care they need.”

Here, by the way, is the picturesque town of Canistota, with a two-block-long main street and a population of a mere 700 (the Ortman family en toto accounts for fully 10% of that census), about a 45-minute drive west of Sioux Falls, SD. So small is Canistota that, on some days, the number of patients visiting the clinic begins to rival the number of permanent residents—the facility has been known to receive as many as 450 patients in a single 12-hour period.

At some future date, the patient population may surpass that of the residents owing to the fact that patient visits overall are on the rise. The Ortman Clinic reports about a 5% gain in volume for each of the last 5 years and projects

the trend to continue. Interestingly, virtually none of that growth can be attributed to formal marketing since formal marketing is not utilized. "Never needed to," says Tom Ortman. "People know about us by word-of-mouth."

Formal marketing probably would not work anyway because print ads, TV spots, and the like cannot do justice to explaining the Ortman Clinic experience, insists Jay Ortman, DC, CCSP, the oldest member of the family's fourth generation of doctors. "People call up and ask us, 'What's it like there?' And we have to tell them, you just have to come and try it. There's no way to adequately describe it. So they get on the plane, fly out here, and stay for 3, 4, 5 days, then they say, 'Yeah, now we understand,'" Jay Ortman explains.

Doug Ortman, DC, gives the weekly Wednesday health talk to interested patients. All the doctors take turns giving these health lectures after office hours.

Bright Lights, Growing City

In 1927, to accommodate out-of-area patients, the first Ortmans erected alongside their farmhouse a 24-room hotel and gas station. A few years later, the clinic moved off the farm and into Canistota. Another Ortman-owned hotel shortly thereafter went up, this time a 4-story, 60-room lodge. It was eventually sold to outside investors and no longer is under Ortman family control.

Incredibly, there currently are a total of seven thriving hotels and motels in little Canistota—thriving because all cater to Ortman Clinic patients.

Rejecting the notion that the clinic and its patients would be better served by moving to a large metropolitan area with more convenient access and a gamut of commercial amenities to occupy patients when they are not being seen by the doctors, Weiland says Canistota is an ideal setting for this particular enterprise. The rustic, off-the-beaten-path charm of the place makes Canistota all the more attractive as a getaway destination for the health-conscious and as a peaceful, uplifting haven for those who are seeking to be healed.

"You come here and say goodbye to stress, anxiety, whatever else in life is helping to keep you from being well," he contends. "There's not much to do in Canistota other than work on regaining your health."

As grand a locale as Canistota is, it nevertheless presents some drawbacks. The remoteness for one. "People are less inclined to hop in the car and make the long trip out here if it is for treatment of something minor," says Weiland.

Another drawback is that weather and the passing of the seasons impact Canistota more than they do the big cities. For example, in winter, heavy snows make travel enough of a challenge that many would-be patients opt to endure their discomfort at home until spring rather than hazard a trip on unpredictable rural roads.

The vast majority of patients coming to the Ortman Clinic are adults, with women more numerous than men. Doctors currently taking on those cases are (in addition to Lon Weiland and Tom and Jay Ortman): Todd Weiland, DC; Charles Ortman, DC; Ivan Ortman, DC; Wayne Ortman, DC; Ryan Ortman, DC; and Doug Ortman, DC.

"We each have our own separate practices and see our own regular patients, although we work under the same roof and under a single name," says Lon Weiland.

Most first-time patients already have in mind a specific Ortman Clinic doctor under whose care they wish to be placed. About a quarter of new patients, however, express no such preference and so are assigned to whichever doctor is next in line to receive them (or to whichever doctor happens to be least busy at that moment, Weiland informs).

Each doctor typically sees no fewer than 20 patients a day, and caseloads of up to 50 patients a day are not out of the ordinary during peak season (which arrives around October when the harvest is in and farmers can afford the time and expense of a stay at the clinic).

The Ortman Clinic staff (L–R): Rick Popkes, office manager; Judy Ligtenberg, CA; Janette Nugteren, CA; Julie Otto, CA; Jeri Koepp, CA; Evelyn Kane, CA, laboratory and x-ray; Cara MacDonald, CA, laboratory and x-ray; and Randy Koehn, maintenance supervisor. Not pictured: Nancy Laufman, CA, and Lanette Koehn, insurance associate.

Because volumes tend to run so high, the Ortman Clinic has long been interested in ways to promote doctor-productivity and thereby enable each practitioner to handle more patients per day without being overwhelmed. Computerized record-keeping was introduced about 15 years ago, and before that the clinic set up an in-house laboratory to support faster turnaround of routine testing, including blood and urine analyses. Also on-site are state-of-the-art x-ray facilities and physiotherapy modalities such as traction, diathermy, ultrasound, and microcurrent stimulation. The clinic, which operates 5 days a week, has in addition gone to a system of advance scheduling.

“It used to be first-come, first-served,” says Weiland. “You could just walk in without an appointment, sit down in our 100-seat waiting room, and expect to be seen in short order. But then we got to the point where the lobby would fill up just about as soon as we opened the doors in the morning and stay full all day no matter how fast we worked.” Having patients now call to set up an appointment ensures that everybody who asks for the doctors’ help will not be given short shrift.

Modern tools notwithstanding, the Ortman Clinic approach to chiropractic remains essentially unchanged a full three generations after Amon Ortman first rolled up his sleeves and invited the infirm and hurting on his doorstep to take a seat.

“The needs and desires of our patients are the same today as they were back then,” says Jay Ortman. “That being so, there’s no reason for us to alter what we’re doing. Our approach works, it gets people feeling better quickly, and they don’t have to pay much money for it.” CP

A Family that Adjusts Together

The nine practicing doctors of the Ortman Clinic in Canistota, SD, are all members of the same family—third- and fourth-generation descendants of founding chiropractor Amon Ortman, DC.

Ivan Ortman, DC, checks patient Sanford Sandbakken from Harlington, Tex.

How is that so many Ortman grandchildren and great-grandchildren chose to enter the practice of chiropractic and keep the family enterprise humming? Says Lon Weiland, DC, whose mother was a daughter of Amon Ortman, the explanation in part has to do with belonging to a family that’s the epitome of close-knit. It also has to do with wanting to be part of a successful business that is steeped in tradition and is beloved by patients the continent over.

But while some in the younger Ortman generations intended all along to follow in the family footsteps, others—like Weiland—had different plans. For instance, his goal growing up was to go to college, get a degree in engineering, and put as many miles between himself and Canistota as possible.

“I wasn’t being groomed for a career as an Ortman Clinic doctor,” says Weiland. “In fact, my parents never much talked about that. They put no pressure on me whatsoever to choose what I would do as a grown-up.”

Ryan Ortman, DC, cares for infant patient Alexia Tieszen from Canistota, SD, while her mother looks on.

In his sophomore year at college, Weiland discovered engineering was far less exhilarating than he at first imagined. About that same time, his thoughts—and heart—began to turn homeward. Before long, he decided to enroll in chiropractic school with the intention of returning to Canistota and the Ortman Clinic.

Weiland studied at the National College of Chiropractic in Chicago, receiving his diploma in 1973. From there, he headed straight back to Canistota for his debut in practice.

Tom Ortman, DC, another of the family's third-generation doctors, is another who had no thought of becoming a chiropractor, let alone one working at the Ortman Clinic, until about the midway point in undergraduate school. In Tom Ortman's case, he was in training to become an ordained minister with a focus on teaching when he decided to go to the National College of Chiropractic in 1968.

"I began wondering about this place my dad went to work at every day," he recalls. "Something about it started to fascinate me."

Tom Ortman, DC, uses the Ortman Technique on his Amish patient.

Jay Ortman, DC, CCSP, is the first member of the fourth generation of Ortman's to take up the healing art. Originally, Jay Ortman planned to become an eye surgeon. He caught a different vision halfway through undergraduate school and decided to accept the family torch awaiting to be passed to him.

"I knew something special was happening here at the clinic," he says. "Then I realized how much I wanted to be part of it."

Jay Ortman graduated with the Class of 1994 at Northwestern College of Chiropractic.

Of course, not all Ortman's have elected to involve themselves with the clinic, either as practitioners or in administrative capacities.

"About half the family has gone off and taken up other pursuits in other places," says Tom Ortman. "But we still love them." CP