



RESEARCH REPORT

Osteopaths' professional views, identities and conceptions – A qualitative grounded theory study



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Abstract *Background:* The professional status of osteopathy calls for the critical evaluation of the beliefs, knowledge and conceptions which underlie practitioners' clinical practice.

Objectives: To explore experienced osteopaths' professional identities, views and overall conceptions of osteopathy in the UK.

Methods: This qualitative study employed constructivist grounded theory set in the interpretive research paradigm. The constant comparative method of analysis was used to analyse and code interview data. A total of seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve UK registered osteopaths. Data collection methods involved semi-structured interviews with participants and observation and video-recording of clinical appointments, which were followed by video-prompted reflective interviews.

Results: There was diversity in how osteopaths viewed different aspects of their professional practice. Views were constructed into the major categories of: professional identity, traditional osteopathic theories and principles, health and disease and practice skills. Together these views formed three qualitatively different overall conceptions of osteopathy, termed: practitioner-centred osteopathy, collaborative osteopathy, and osteopathy as empowerment.

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Conclusions: Osteopaths in this study held differing views, identities and conceptions in relation to their practise of osteopathy. This diversity in professional identities and conceptions may help to explain the variation of individual osteopaths' clinical decision-making and clinical approaches, thereby contributing to an epistemology of osteopathy. These findings may be helpful to educators when planning curricula and clinically tutoring osteopathy students. Further research is required to explore how these views and conceptions develop and evolve during undergraduate education and on-going professional development.

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Implications for practice

- As professionals, osteopaths are required to critically examine the views, beliefs and conceptions that underlie their clinical work.
- There is diversity in the range of views that experienced osteopaths hold in relation to core aspects of their practice.
- How an individual practitioner conceives the nature of osteopathy and identifies with their profession may influence their clinical decision-making and the clinical approaches they take with their patients.
- As knowledge and practice are constantly changing, practitioners should critically reflect on their own personal conceptions of osteopathy and how these relate to their clinical decision-making and practice.

Introduction

In many countries, osteopathy has undergone a process of 'professionalisation', which Cant and Shamar define as a "type of occupational change and formation that involves unification, standardisation, and the acquisition of external legitimacy".^{1,p.197} There is evidence of the professionalisation of osteopathy in several corners of the world and different countries are at varying stages of the process. For example, in the USA the formal process of professionalisation of osteopathy first began in the early 1960s, and has resulted in the establishment of an osteopathic 'medical' profession which enjoys the full range of clinical practices and procedures employed by the orthodox medical profession, in addition to osteopathic manipulative therapy.² In comparison, osteopathy in the UK and the antipodes is considered to be an emerging manual therapy profession³⁻⁵ where professionalisation has taken place since the early 1990s. Examples of strategies taken to facilitate the process of professionalisation of osteopathy in

the UK and antipodes include³⁻⁵: 1) the formation of a single statutory register of osteopaths; 2) a regulatory body which sets standards of practice and training; 3) structured and externally inspected educational programmes; 4) legally protected professional title of 'Osteopath'; and 5) measures in place to discredit those practitioners who do not practice to agreed standards. All of these strategies have provided osteopathy with unity, exclusivity and social closure which are considered to be characteristics of a profession.¹

The professional status of osteopathy carries with it the requirement to be critically reflective, and to constantly self-evaluate and self-question in order to develop the knowledge base which underpins clinical practice and also to understand *how* osteopaths know, *what* they know (an *epistemology* of practice).⁶ Although a challenging process, identifying an epistemology of osteopathy through critical enquiry and research is crucial to the continued development of the osteopathic profession. A number of other healthcare professions have discussed the importance of developing an epistemology of practice, including the physiotherapy⁷⁻¹⁰ and nursing professions.^{11,12} Although osteopaths' professional knowledge, values and beliefs has been discussed theoretically,^{13,14} and investigated in relation to specific aspects of clinical practice (e.g. prescription rights¹⁵ and chronic musculoskeletal pain¹⁶), there is little research-based knowledge of how practitioners conceive osteopathic practice and how this influences their clinical work. Developing an epistemology of osteopathy through research would allow for the identification of the tacit or non-propositional knowledge used by practitioners, as they work through the complex problems of daily practice. Research of this kind would help to understand what motivates individual practitioners' actions and decision-making when working clinically with patients. Furthermore, research which develops knowledge of what steers osteopaths' clinical actions and behaviour would facilitate

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