



MASTERCLASS

# Becoming an expert: A Masterclass in developing clinical expertise



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**Summary** This Masterclass explores how practitioners may develop clinical expertise. The terms expert and expertise are initially outlined along with the attributes of a practitioner with expertise. This is followed by an exploration of the literature in relation to three key ways to develop expertise: through experience with patients, formal postgraduate education and through direct observation of practice with a mentor. The theoretical basis of these activities is critically reviewed to highlight their underpinning educational value and pedagogy. It is proposed that critical reflection on practice enhanced by direct observation of practice with a mentor and formal postgraduate education each provide a potentially powerful tool for learning and the development of clinical expertise.

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## Introduction

The aim of this Masterclass paper is to explore how osteopaths and health practitioners may develop their clinical expertise and perhaps become known by others as an expert. My knowledge in this area has come from over ten years experience as a course leader of a musculoskeletal physiotherapy postgraduate course that was primarily focused on developing expertise of practitioners, from

doctoral research study exploring learning transitions of musculoskeletal physiotherapists undertaking the aforementioned course, and from supervision of research students from a range of healthcare professions exploring this topic area. This is not a definitive and comprehensive rendering of the subject, rather the perspective of the author as an educationalist and researcher and long ago practitioner, who has been exploring this topic for a number of years. It is hoped that this paper will help guide practitioners who wish to develop their clinical expertise and facilitate expertise in others.

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## Expert and clinical expertise

Dictionary definitions of an expert refer to someone who is very knowledgeable about, or skillful in, a particular area.<sup>1</sup> This raises the issue of who decides the level of knowledge and skill needed and what criteria would determine whether someone is an expert. The complexity of osteopathic practice (and other healthcare practice) may not lend itself to a list of performance indicators on which to determine whether someone is 'an expert'. Perhaps the notion of someone being an expert is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder; it is a concept constructed by the onlooker. The term 'expert' suggests a static and final position, however new knowledge is constantly being created, so how often would someone considered an expert need to be re-validated? Because of these difficulties in the term 'expert', the use of 'expertise' has generally been used in this paper, except where accuracy to the literature demands otherwise. Expertise has been referred to as the proficiency and judgement acquired through clinical experience and clinical practice.<sup>2</sup> Expertise relates to a person's characteristics, skills and knowledge with a sense of it being fluid and changing. Clinical expertise is described here as the ability of the practitioner to effectively integrate their practice knowledge with the patient's clinical presentation, values and preferences to maximize the therapeutic encounter for the patient.

## Attributes of practitioners with clinical expertise

In considering broadly the characteristics of expertise, the United Kingdom Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education learning

outcomes for masters level learning (Table 1), provide a helpful overview.<sup>3</sup>

Narrowing down to the particular of clinical expertise, the literature provides a broad array of characteristics of a practitioner summarised in Table 2. The broad range of attributes include patient-centred practice, critical evaluation and understanding of their practice knowledge, and an ability to learn in and from their practice. A recent grounded theory study suggests that some of these characteristics may be found in experienced osteopaths.<sup>4,5</sup>

The last characteristic in Table 2, the capability to learn in, and from, practice (that is, to learn from experience) is considered essential to maintain expertise.<sup>8,10,35</sup> To learn in, and from, practice requires practitioners to be capable of and disposed to critically examining, evaluating, creating, developing and transforming their practice knowledge and clinical practice.<sup>10,29,32,33,35</sup> It is the questioning and challenging of practice knowledge that leads to its transformation.<sup>36</sup> The practitioner therefore needs to be critically reflective and reflexive.<sup>32</sup> The requirement to learn in, and from, practice embraces lifelong learning and highlights the importance of critical evaluation skills.<sup>27</sup>

## Development of clinical expertise

The developmental process by which practitioners enhance their clinical practice expertise is a contentious issue in the literature. Clinical practice experience with patients, formal post-graduate education and having mentors in practice were each considered instrumental in the professional development of clinical experts.<sup>8</sup> These aspects provide a framework for this section and are discussed in turn.

**Table 1** Documented learning outcomes of Masters level 7 learning.<sup>3</sup>

Typically holders will be able to:

- deal with complex issues systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional level
- continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
- the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
- decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations
- the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development

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