



COMMENTARY

Assessment of osteopaths: Developing a capability-based approach to reviewing readiness to practice

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Abstract A new approach to assessment design is considered through the process of developing a set of capabilities for osteopathic practice that starts from an understanding of a concept of 'practice' applicable to real, situated osteopathic healthcare. Appropriately framed capabilities inform a variety of assessment needs, allowing different tools to assess common standards across many credentialing, high stakes, summative and formative situations, and through work based practice. An argument is made for the inclusion of a work-based phase of assessment in high stakes examinations for overseas trained candidates as the best way to capture real/situated practice enabling the assessment process to contribute to on-going professional learning. The relationship of assessment to learning is regarded as vital to the development of many aspects of regulatory policy, programme accreditation, and continuing professional development, and needs to be considered by stakeholders concerned with maintaining and improving standards of practice.

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Introduction

Osteopaths are assessed during their education and training, and sometimes during their professional lives, for purposes of credentialing, re-credentialing or, for some, when they migrate to another jurisdiction. The current paper describes

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an approach to the development of capabilities for osteopathic practice with associated assessment techniques and processes. The proposed approach seeks to align assessment of osteopaths with the best-practice approaches to health care practitioner assessment, whilst still ensuring that what is being assessed is recognisably 'osteopathic'. This paper discusses a project to develop a set of capabilities for osteopathic practice, as well as the developmental concepts for considering an allied assessment process and assessment tools for credentialing overseas trained osteopaths who wish to work in Australia or New Zealand.¹

The premise of the current paper is that change in assessment design for credentialing overseas trained osteopaths is necessary. The reason for this is that osteopathic practice worldwide is taking place within a changing regulatory framework. For example, in New Zealand the Osteopathic Council of New Zealand administers a single regulatory framework; whilst in Australia from 2010 a single national regulatory framework administered by the Osteopathy Board of Australia took over from a wide range of state registration bodies operating with different standards and assessment regimes. In an increasing number of nations osteopaths are, or are becoming, regulated professionals rather than artisan practitioners, and this places new obligations on the profession. Although the education of osteopaths has been developing for a long time it is now necessary to consider whether the direction of osteopathic education and the ways in which its practitioners are assessed meet both the continuing needs of the profession as well as those of regulators.

As part of the challenges to the osteopathic profession comes discussion about the development of such things as codes of conduct, scopes of practice and standards for and approaches to assessment within osteopathic training and practice. The aim is to achieve international parity in these matters, as it is only under these circumstances that osteopaths will be able to move and practice in different jurisdictions, with confidence that standards are equitable. This is a major challenge because the historically wide variety of biographies and training of osteopaths worldwide means that many have quite individualistic perspectives on what constitutes osteopathic practice, standards and scope, as well as the roles and boundaries of practice, and they may take varying views on the values and principles that frame their work. While much is shared across the profession, there is likely to be considerable diversity of practice as a result of variation in training and continuing professional development.

This diversity is particularly likely to manifest itself in Australasia as many overseas trained osteopaths have sought registration in Australia or New Zealand. Such variation in training and experience pose a particular challenge to assessment design and implementation within newly emerging regulatory frameworks.

Assessment contexts

Should assessment of overseas trained osteopaths for entry into the profession be more closely related to ongoing assessment and authentic work based practices rather than to high stakes examinations conducted at the end of entry-level osteopathic programmes? In one sense, assessment of overseas candidates stands apart from entry level assessment because it necessarily engages with professionals already working within the field who have a much greater range of experiences, capabilities and professional approaches and values. Also, assessment tools designed within the particular contexts of academic institutions and educational programmes are not readily transferable or applicable to assessment of work based situations²—the institutional assessment culture in this regard is not oriented to the same perspective, that is assessment to certify graduates is not compatible with that to register overseas trained practitioners. The migration and global mobility of healthcare workers creates a novel set of assessment challenges. It raises the question of 'how assessment can be best organised to capture the nature of a person's professional capability and suitability to work within any given regulatory environment?' and 'how best to guide them for future development to either maintain their regulatory status or to improve and mature their current skills and knowledge to meet required standards for entry?' However, it would seem unfair and inappropriate to use quite different assessments to permit entry into the profession just because candidates come from different origins or have trained through different pathways.

It is proposed here that the best way to answer these questions is to develop a suitable set of capabilities for osteopathic practice and to use these to design and implement appropriate assessment strategies. While the particularities of assessment may differ in the two cases, because of different circumstances, common competencies and capabilities will be assessed. It is in the design of the capabilities and their related criteria—in particular the performance indicators—that one aims to ensure that competency in osteopathy is visible and demonstrable.

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