



Commentary

The role of osteopathy in clinical care: Broadening the evidence-base

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ABSTRACT

Osteopathy is a system of health care practiced in various countries throughout the world that focuses on osteopathic manual techniques as a cornerstone of patient care. However, we still know little about the practice, role and use of osteopathy within the broader health system in most countries. With this in mind, this paper proposes a possible framework for advancing further research on this topic. The framework is divided into issues associated with core stakeholders including health consumers, osteopaths, other health professionals, and policymakers and funding bodies. The development of a rigorous health services research agenda around this topic has much to offer and the framework outlined here is offered with the hope of inspiring a broader field of inquiry into osteopathy in the clinical care setting.

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1. Introduction

Osteopathy is a health profession which primarily utilises physical examinations and treatments and focuses on integrating the neuro-musculoskeletal, visceral and craniosacral systems [1]. The practice of osteopathy, whilst broadly fitting within this definition, varies across different countries [1]. Most commonly, osteopathy is practiced as a manual therapy and professional training primarily centres on osteopathic manual techniques as a cornerstone of effective treatment [1]. One significant exception to this is in the United States where completion of osteopathic professional training results in a licence to practice medicine as an osteopathic physician in line with conventional medical physicians [1]. Alongside international variability, the position of osteopathy within the delivery of health care in each country differ from nation to nation.

Osteopaths commonly treat musculoskeletal conditions such as back pain, shoulder pain and neck pain as well non-specific musculoskeletal problems [2–4]. The prevalence of osteopathy use amongst the general population in Australia, United Kingdom and United States is reported up to 10% [3,5], with little difference in rates of use amongst subpopulations such as individuals with back pain (UK: 13.5% [6]; Australia: 8.8% [7]) and pregnant women (6.2%

[8]. Manual treatments and interventions performed by osteopaths include soft tissue techniques, joint articulation and mobilisation, high velocity low amplitude (HVLA) manipulation, muscle energy and cranial techniques, exercise therapy and patient education [4,9]. One of the few areas where the profile of individuals who consult with an osteopath has been investigated is within a population of pregnant women, and even in this case has only received preliminary attention [10]. Despite such context, the role and relevance of osteopaths and the integration of osteopathy in the delivery of health care services generally remain unclear.

1.1. Current research examining osteopathy

Research within the field of osteopathy has primarily focused upon specific topic areas such as applied physiology (including symptom areas and symptoms), education, and efficacy outcomes from osteopathic manipulative treatments (OMT). Conditions which have received research attention across these topic areas include back pain [11–17], headaches [18,19], pregnancy [20,21], and pediatric complaints [22]. A range of studies have also been conducted which include osteopathy as an intervention alongside other manual therapies and therefore do not provide clear information about the value of osteopathy as a discrete therapy [23–25].

Efforts have been made from within the osteopathic profession to identify research priorities for osteopathy, with a primary focus on clinical research [26]. Future research into osteopathy would benefit from an inquiry which extends and complements existing

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areas of research focus. Analysis of studies published over the last five years (since 2011) in the two top osteopathic journals, i.e. the *International Journal of Osteopathic Medicine* and the *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*, highlights these existing focus areas (Table 1). Whilst this overview does not replace a systematic review of a range of databases and journals and as such may not be a true reflection of the trends in osteopathic research more widely available, the spread of research in the top osteopathy-specific peer-reviewed journals provides a summary of the type of research currently prioritised by the osteopathic research community. Based on this analysis, over two thirds of papers published since 2011 fall within treatment-based clinical interventions or education-based research projects (Table 1). However, the clinical practice of osteopathy is a holistic system of care that encompasses a wide variety of treatments, which are applied to the individual within the framework of osteopathic principles. As such, research examining specific treatments that are used not only by osteopaths but also other health care professions, and which may be applied in a non-osteopathic or non-holistic manner, may have limited value for developing the real-world evidence-base of osteopathy in clinical practice. For example, research which supports a treatment or intervention used by not only osteopaths but by other health professionals offers limited insights into the particular value which may be associated with receiving care from an osteopath rather than other health professionals providing the same treatment.

Notably, beyond clinical research, there is also a real need to undertake empirical enquiry related to the practice, workforce and use of osteopathy in line with a health services research (HSR) approach - defined as “*the critical, scientific study of health and health care issues with a focus ranging from international, national and regional populations through to smaller localised/specialised groupings and individuals*” [27]. This broadening of the scope of research within osteopathy is essential to inform policymakers, health administrators and other key stakeholders of the current and potential role of osteopathy in the wider health care system. In particular, workforce data, public safety, economics of treatment, and the effectiveness of the broad system of osteopathic holistic care when compared to other care options available within, or as a complement to, the conventional health system are all examples of issues that require attention. A body of work has been published over time which encompasses aspects of HSR such as patient expectations and experiences of osteopathic care [28–34], socio-demographic characteristics and presenting symptoms of osteopathic patients [35–37], and practice approaches of osteopathic physicians [38]. Much of this research has been conducted in the United Kingdom over the past 30 years with additional efforts supported more recently by groups such as the General Osteopathic Council in the UK, which draws upon HSR to inform its policy development and assess the effectiveness of its regulatory processes [39].

The purpose of this paper is to propose one HSR agenda that will allow the future exploration of important areas associated with the role osteopathy can play in health care generally and in the delivery of neuro-musculoskeletal health care specifically. Our intention is to identify a possible range of issues for investigation that we feel may help develop a broader osteopathic research approach to encompass diverse research methodologies ranging from epidemiological studies through to health economic analyses. It is not the intention of this paper to outline a comprehensive research strategy for osteopathy but it is hoped that the proposed agenda will inspire the research community to examine osteopathic clinical care from a range of viewpoints and ultimately help lead to better health care and patient outcomes.

2. A broader range of research inquiry

A range of approaches well suited to expanding our empirical investigation of contemporary osteopathy can be found within the broad field of HSR. The framework outlined below is not definitive but does provide one framework for future HSR exploration of osteopathy and the osteopathic profession.

2.1. The use and users of osteopathy

Patient-centred health care is acknowledged as a vital requirement when developing relevant and appropriate health services [40]. However, developing health services that are responsive to the needs of the population requires a clear understanding of the nature of osteopathy use as well as the characteristics of users. Unfortunately, the existing literature does not yet provide sufficient insights into the behaviours, perceptions, experiences and decision-making of osteopathy users. As such, a number of research questions around osteopathy use and users demand attention including: Which demographics influence osteopathy use amongst the general population? What is the impact of gender and biography upon a patient's decision to seek osteopathic care? And what role does level of education or household income have on enabling or limiting patient access to osteopaths?

The impact of health status and use of other health services on patients' use of osteopathy also requires examination. Key questions surrounding this area include: For which health conditions are individuals consulting with an osteopath? What treatment pathways do osteopathy users follow prior to consulting with an osteopath? What are the reasons patients of osteopaths choose osteopathy rather than other manual therapies and providers for the management of their health? And to what degree are patients consulting osteopaths using other health services concurrent to osteopathic care?

An important area which allows a more nuanced understanding of the use and users of osteopathic health care is the experience,

Table 1

Categorisation of original research articles published in International Journal of Osteopathic Medicine and The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association, 2011–2015.

Journal	Volume: Issue	Applied Physiology	Education	Specific Treatments	Health Services Research	Other
International Journal of Osteopathic Medicine	18	2	4	7	3	2
	17	0	9	4	2	0
	16	1	4	4	0	0
	15	1	1	5	1	0
	14	1	2	3	0	1
The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association	115	14	20	50	1	19
	114	11	21	55	0	10
	113	8	23	42	0	16
	112	15	9	35	0	13
	111	25	12	32	0	20
Total (n)		78	105	237	7	81
Frequency distribution (%)		15%	21%	47%	1%	16%

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