

The role of osteopathy for direct referrals and diagnostic imaging

Osteopaths can currently directly refer health consumers for a limited number of diagnostic imaging items under the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and can only privately refer patients to medical specialists. The expansion of diagnostic imaging rights and the provision of direct referral rights will reduce the costs to the MBS and the health consumer themselves by avoiding unnecessary consultations, lessen the burden on general practice, and streamline the diagnostic and management process.

What is Osteopathy Australia advocating for?

We strongly recommend that the government commit to funding and supporting the implementation of direct referrals and expand diagnostic imaging referral rights. This should include the following for all osteopaths:

- Direct referral rights to orthopaedic surgeons as recommended in the Scope of Practice Review final report¹
- The addition of referral rights for direct referral to ultrasound when preferable to plain radiology and where clinically indicated, for the musculoskeletal system, spinal and associated regions, as well as for a range of neuro-musculoskeletal conditions such as tendon and muscle tears, ligament sprains or tears, nerve entrapments and joint effusions.
- The expansion of x-ray imaging referral rights, beyond the spine and pelvis, to include the plain radiography of the extremities to aid in diagnosis, treatment planning or referral.

Why this benefits Australians

- The removal of unnecessary structural barriers to allow osteopaths to provide direct in-scope referrals to orthopaedic surgeons is a safe way to help reduce care delays, limit the duplication of care and significantly reduce costs to health consumers and the Medicare scheme itself.
- Increases the availability of GP appointments by reducing potentially unnecessary appointments taken up by health consumers seeking MBS supported referrals.
- Streamline the care process and reducing time delays in accessing care.
- Reduces the impact of current workforce shortages acknowledged across Australia.

¹ Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, Unleashing the Potential of our Health Workforce – Scope of Practice Review Final Report, [Internet], 2024, available from <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/unleashing-the-potential-of-our-health-workforce-scope-of-practice-review-final-report?language=en>

- Improve access and equity for Australians to healthcare.

Policy issues and barriers

- MBS reform needed for recognition of direct referral rights and expanded diagnostic imaging rights.
- Lack of understanding and recognition of osteopathy scope of practice by governmental departments and other health practitioners.
- Lack of governmental commitment to implement recommendations made in the Scope of Practice Review.

Review

This statement will be reviewed as often as required to align with legislative, regulatory, policy and/or practice change. Last review: January 2026.

Need more information or help?

For further information, a suggestion or to discuss this topic, please:

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- Call Osteopathy Australia on 1800 467 836
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