

Osteopathy Scope of Practice

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This statement is for health professionals, third party funders and policy makers. It gives an overview of osteopathic practice and its place within the Australian healthcare system.

This statement has been developed by Osteopathy Australia in alignment with the *Osteopathic Service Descriptors* [1], the *Capabilities for Osteopathic Practice* [2], the *Code of Conduct for Registered Health Practitioners* [3] and the World Health Organisation's *Benchmarks for Training in Osteopathy* [4]. The statement is further influenced by broader health policies, legislation, regulation and health workforce debate.

Osteopaths are committed to high quality patient centred healthcare. As the scientific understanding of health and disease evolves, this Statement will require on-going revision.

An overview of Osteopathy

Summary

Recent research has described osteopathy as a healthcare profession that is underpinned by biopsychosocial and holistic principles, and that focuses on the health and mobility of all tissues of the body. Osteopathic healthcare includes a thorough primary care assessment and the application of a range of manual therapies and health promotion strategies tailored to the individual, that aim to optimise function and health [5].

The emphasis on the neuro-musculoskeletal system as integral to the body's function, a person's health and to patient care is a defining characteristic of osteopathy. Osteopaths use multiple clinical approaches including manual therapy, exercise advice and prescription, lifestyle advice and education where appropriate.

Osteopaths are autonomous primary contact practitioners who treat patients across the life span. Approximately 90% of patients access osteopathic care without a referral.

Osteopathic principles

Osteopathy recognises the following principles:

- >> The body is one unit of function
- >> The body has self-regulating mechanisms
- >> The body's structure and function are reciprocally inter-related

Therapeutic management is applied with an understanding of these principles and a thorough knowledge of clinical sciences.

These osteopathic principles, in conjunction with current medical knowledge, inform the care given to patients. Scientific plausibility and evidence-informed reasoning are fundamental to diagnosis, treatment and case management.

Principles of patient care

Osteopaths follow these principles of patient care:

- >> The patient is the focus for healthcare
- >> The patient has the primary responsibility for their own health
- >> Effective treatment is founded on these principles and:
 - a. incorporates evidence informed guidelines
 - b. optimises the patients natural healing capacity and self-management
 - c. seeks to address the primary cause of disease, and
 - d. emphasises health maintenance and disease prevention.

Osteopaths acknowledge the uniqueness of each patient and seek to optimise their health and wellbeing.

Modern osteopathic practice is informed and improved by the integration of relevant practice guidelines [6]. Osteopathy Australia is committed to educating members on current best practice.

Regulation, Education and Continuing Professional Development

Osteopathy is one of 16 Government regulated professions under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). AHPRA supports the Osteopathy Board of Australia (OBA) to protect the public by ensuring that only osteopaths who are suitably trained and qualified can register, and by ensuring that they practise in a competent and ethical manner.

To these ends the OBA publishes codes and guidelines [7], approves standards for university courses, handles complaints, and conducts disciplinary hearings. Other requirements include criminal background checks, English language proficiency, and professional indemnity insurance.

Osteopaths are university trained for 4-5 years through either a double bachelors or bachelors/ master's program. University courses must be accredited by the Australasian Osteopathic Accreditation Council [8].

Registration requires a commitment to continuing professional development. This must meet a minimum standard set by the OBA and have a clinical focus relevant to a practitioner's area of practice [9]. Many osteopaths continue their education while practising by undertaking higher degrees (e.g. PhD, Masters, Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma) by research or in clinical focus areas, or in other clinically related short courses.

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Scope of Practice

Osteopathy is a system of health care. It integrates an understanding of clinical diagnosis and assessment with the knowledge of the inter-relationship of the neuro-musculoskeletal system with other body systems.

Osteopathy is holistic in the sense that health and disease are multi-factorial, and an osteopath considers a patient in the relevant biopsychosocial context. This applies equally for prevention, diagnosis or therapeutic management.

Osteopathy Australia endorses a broad scope of practice for the profession. Narrowly defined scope restricts opportunities and innovation for individuals, the profession, and the health system.

Within the broader professional scope of practice, individual osteopaths will develop their own personal/professional scope. The personal scope is for the individual to establish, having in mind the particular priorities that attach to:

- >> Education and qualifications
- >> Geography and demography
- >> Areas of clinical interest
- >> Patients' unique health needs
- >> Service requirements of Medicare and third party funders

The practice of osteopathy requires broad diagnostic competencies. Osteopaths use standard clinical processes in history taking and examination, such as orthopaedic special tests, neurological examinations and systems reviews. Imaging or other tests may be requested or recommended where clinically indicated. A differential diagnosis may be required to determine if the patient's presentation is appropriate for osteopathic management.

Osteopaths combine a highly developed sense of palpatory skill with an understanding of functional anatomy, biomechanics and contemporary evidence informed neuro-musculoskeletal and pain management clinical interventions. An osteopath identifies strain patterns in the tissues and seeks to normalise the body's response, as well as improve functionality for activities of daily living in partnership with the patient through self-management approaches.

Osteopaths operate on a continuum of care, informed by research and extending across assessment, diagnosis, therapy/ treatment and ongoing advice and education. This is reflected in the emergent nature of osteopathic clinical practice, a distinctive characteristic of osteopathy, which may contrast with modalities where a formulaic technique or treatment approach is common.

Many professions have skills, qualities and attributes in common, and often use similar techniques when working with patients with neuro-musculoskeletal presentations.

Osteopaths recognise that whilst there may well be a musculoskeletal component in many patient presentations, osteopathic care may not be indicated or the principal modality in all cases. If the osteopath considers that a patient's needs are best met by other healthcare service providers, an appropriate referral is made. Osteopaths support the use of pharmaceutical interventions by other health practitioners where clinically indicated [10].

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Advanced practice in osteopathy

All osteopaths increase their clinical awareness through continuing professional development. While neuro-musculoskeletal assessment, manual therapy interventions and clinical exercise prescription are core skills for all osteopaths, some osteopaths expand their capabilities for specific patient groups and issues to enhance delivery of osteopathic services.

Osteopathy Australia is committed to recognising quality clinical practice in the diverse areas that make up the professional focuses of osteopaths, to enhance recognition of the contribution made by the profession to the health of Australians.

Osteopathy Australia is the peak body responsible for recognising quality and advanced standing in focus areas of osteopathic practice by developing credentialing processes based on clear and transparent standards.

Osteopathy Australia supports a system of credentialing that is accountable and effective in recognising experience and training and acknowledges the principles for credentialing outlined by the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care [11].

Credentialing for quality practice is a proven approach to enabling broader practice privileges and overcoming legislative, regulatory and funding barriers to the timely and responsive provision of health care to patients.

Osteopathy within the healthcare system

Osteopaths mainly work in primary health care settings, including osteopathic or multi-disciplinary clinics or in association with general practitioners. Some osteopaths work within specialist pain management services, aged care facilities or occupational health settings.

Osteopaths may apply their professional knowledge in a wide range of non-clinical settings such as universities, research, healthcare management, and health education.

Osteopaths understand the wider healthcare environment and the role of the primary care practitioner within the healthcare system. Likewise, better patient outcomes and more cohesive multidisciplinary care rely on other health professionals understanding the role and competencies of osteopaths.

Osteopathy is a global profession. However, regulation, education and the role of osteopaths vary greatly from country to country [12]. These range from osteopathic physicians or surgeons working in hospitals or general practice in the USA; to allied health practitioners in countries like Australia, New Zealand or the United Kingdom; to complimentary therapists working in countries

lacking regulation and/or accredited education standards. The Osteopathic International Alliance gives an indication of this diversity.

Osteopathy Australia is committed to ensuring that the Scope of Practice in Osteopathy remains congruent with national health priorities and the strategic direction of Australian healthcare policy.

Osteopaths understand the wider healthcare environment and the role of the primary care practitioner.

References

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