A Delphi study to identify research priorities for osteopathy

**Aim of the study:** To identify research priorities for the osteopathic profession including:

- The most important areas of practice requiring evidence
- To influence and be informed by a variety of stakeholders including those involved in osteopathic education, the profession’s regulator, members of the professional association, practitioners in special interest groups, funders, patient representatives, and the Department of Health
- To support and influence the Osteopathic Educational Foundation to direct funding that has value to the osteopathic profession and patients attending for osteopathic care
- To map priorities to government priorities and research funding bodies

**Methodology and Method**

A Delphi approach will be used to identify research priorities\(^1,2\). It has been recommended that identification of research priorities must be undertaken within the context of their intended use to achieve maximal effect. This will involve a series of steering groups who will act as an expert panel. Each group will participate in a prioritisation exercise. Three rounds of the Delphi will take place; each round will be distributed by email. The Delphi will take place:

**Round 1:** All panel members to each identify between 5-10 research topics

↓ 4 weeks All topics suggested by panel members will be collated and categorised into themes using content analysis. Two researchers will identify themes independently and then collate their analysis.

**Communication with participants via email will be according to the following schedule:**

*Distribution of survey link*

*Reminder email 1 week later*  

*Reminder email 2 weeks later.*

**Round 2:** Each panel member will receive feedback of a list of themed topics with supporting statements.

↓ 4 weeks Panel members will be asked to rate the importance of each topic using a 5-point Likert scale\(^3\).
Panel members will be asked individually to indicate the type of research required to address the evidence gap for the topics they have prioritised.

Communication with participants via email will be according to the following schedule:

**Distribution of survey link**

**Reminder email 1 week later**

**Reminder email 2 weeks later.**

Round 3: Each panel member will receive feedback in the form of a list of themed research topics reaching consensus with their supporting statements and the type of research required.

↓ 4 weeks Each panel member will be asked to rate each topic again.

Each panel member will be invited to make comments about the prioritisation process.

Communication with participants via email will be according to the following schedule:

**Distribution of survey link**

**Reminder email 1 week later**

**Reminder email 2 weeks later.**

A timeline for the entire project is shown in Appendix 1.

Expert panel members will be included from:

- National Council of The General Osteopathic Council (the profession’s regulator), the British Osteopathic Association (the professional association), representatives from the osteopathic educational institutions (OEIs), representatives from NHS osteopaths, and representatives from private practice
- Representatives from the General Osteopathic Council
- Representatives from the British Osteopathic Association
- Representatives from the osteopathic educational institutions including both academic and clinical supervision staff
- Representatives of cranial practitioners including members of the Sutherland Cranial College, Foundation for Paediatric Osteopathy, and the International Cranial Association to represent cranial osteopathy practitioners
- Representatives from osteopaths working in the NHS
- Representatives from osteopaths working in private practice
- Representatives from osteopaths involved in sports care
- Representatives of current and former users of osteopathic care
Representatives from osteopaths working in animal osteopathy will not be included in this study as the focus is on priorities for the human population.

**Sample and location:**

An email will be circulated to osteopaths by the profession’s regulator, the General Osteopathic Council (GOsC), inviting them to participate and respond to the project officer, Carol Fawkes. Osteopaths indicating they wish to participate will be contacted in future by the project officer with the survey link and a copy of the participant information sheet (Appendices 2 and 3). Each questionnaire round will be circulated via email to be completed in the privacy of the individual’s home to avoid bias or coercion. All responses within the expert panel will be anonymised prior to collation and circulation.

**Recruitment:**

Each participant will be given information concerning the timescale of the projects and the potential time commitment involved. They will be asked to reflect on this to ensure that they can devote the necessary time to the project. All participants will be informed that they will be free to withdraw from the project at any stage, without penalty, and no reasons will need to be given. This information is clearly stated in the participant information sheet (Appendix 3). Informed consent will be judged to be enacted on completion and return of the questionnaire for the Delphi study.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval will be sought from the University of Brighton Faculty of Health Research Ethics and Governance Committee (FREGC).

Individual responses from panel members will be confidential and anonymised prior to collation by one of two independent researchers examining themes of the responses. Delphi questionnaires will be coded individually; members of the research team alone will have access to the codes to allow follow up. Any published data will not identify individuals, their institution, or organisations. Membership of the expert panels will be published.

**Analysis of findings**

Descriptive statistics will be produced including the demographics of the expert panels.

**Round 1:**

Content analysis will be used by two independent researchers at each stage.

**Round 2:**

Descriptive statistics will be used to evaluate consensus agreement, including percentage agreement and coefficient of variation. The latter is a normalized measure of dispersion of a probability distribution. The coefficient of variation (CV) is defined as the ratio of the standard deviation $\sigma$ to the mean $\mu$. And a level of consensus will be established. Kendall’s coefficient of concordance will be used to evaluate consensus across all participants. This is a non-parametric statistic. It can be
used for assessing agreement among raters. Kendall’s $W$ ranges from 0 (no agreement) to 1 (complete agreement)\(^5\).

Analysis for each topic will include, therefore:

- Mean rating
- Percentage agreement
- Coefficient of variation
- Kendall’s coefficient of concordance

Consensus will be established if:

- Mean rating of 3.5
- Percentage agreement of $\geq 75\%$
- Coefficient of variation of $\leq 20\%$
- A median ranking of 4 or more and on which more than 75% of participants agree or agree strongly.

Any topic which does not reach consensus will be removed from Round 3 of voting.

**Round 3:**

Descriptive statistics and a value of Kendall’s coefficient of concordance will be calculated for Round 3 also. A composite ranking of topics gaining consensus will be produced. This will produce an order of priority for topics identified. Composite ranking will be achieved following calculation of a composite score for each topic\(^6\).

**Comments from expert panel members**

At the end of the Delphi, each member of the expert panels will be asked to contribute their thoughts on the Delphi process. Comments will be examined to identify if the process can be improved for use in the future.

**Benefits of the research:**

- To be able to identify clear research priorities for the osteopathic profession
- To be able to identify research priorities will ensure the most relevant use of limited funds available from the profession
- To be able to facilitate research collaborations in areas of high priority for the profession with other researchers outside of the profession with expertise in those areas
- To be able to facilitate research collaborations among osteopathic researchers on priority areas and develop research expertise within the profession
- To be able to steer members of the osteopathic educational institutions to select topics for their undergraduates
- To be able to create a resource for potential osteopathic researchers at MSc, PhD, and Professional Doctorate levels\(^7\)
Dissemination of findings

All topics reaching consensus will be published on the website for the National Council for Osteopathic Research (NCOR). The order of priority will be indicated accompanied by the anonymised supporting statements contributed by expert panel members. Papers will be submitted for publication to relevant healthcare journals including *Manual Therapy* and the *International Journal of Osteopathic Medicine*. Articles will be prepared also for the osteopathic press including *The Osteopath* (distributed by the regulator) and *Osteopathy Today* (distributed by the professional association).

References:


## Appendix 1: Gantt chart for Delphi study examining research priorities: revised for period from April, 2012 onwards

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<th>Activity</th>
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Appendix 2: Email text to the profession

Dear osteopath

The National Council for Osteopathic Research is undertaking a study identifying the professions' views on research priorities for the osteopathic profession. We are interested in your views concerning the type of topic areas and research questions which should be pursued as part of a research strategy for the profession.

Your views will be gathered on three separate occasions as part of the developing research study. The participant information sheet and questionnaire will be circulated by email and completion should take no more than 15 minutes and can be done in one “sitting” or across several, to fit in with a busy schedule. You will need to have access to electronic mail (email) and the Internet to be able to participate. The questionnaire is administered through SurveyMonkey software.

The data from the questions will be summarised prior to reporting, so individuals will not be identifiable. This will maintain confidentiality of your responses and participation.

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact Carol Fawkes via email at c.a.fawkes@brighton.ac.uk.
Appendix 3: Participant information sheet (Amended 26-03-2012)

Dear participant

This study is trying to identify research priorities for the osteopathic profession. It uses a Delphi method which involves asking a set of questions, summarising all of the responses and then asking for your views on the summarised answers on two separate occasions. This is done by answering a questionnaire at each stage.

In total, participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire using the computer on three separate occasions. The questionnaire will be circulated by email and completion should take no more than 15 minutes and can be done in one “sitting” or across several, to fit in with a busy schedule. You will be required to have access to electronic mail (email) and the Internet to be able to participate. You can complete the questionnaire as a sole practitioner, or discuss the responses with colleagues and then complete a questionnaire based on these discussions.

The questionnaire is administered through SurveyMonkey software. There are a few questions regarding your background. The data from these questions will be summarised prior to reporting, so individuals will not be identifiable. Other questions ask for your views on research priorities for the osteopathic profession, and data from these will be summarised across respondents. Again, individuals will not be identifiable from the reported results; maintaining confidentiality of your responses and participation.

On-line return of a completed or partially completed questionnaire, through SurveyMonkey, will be taken as your informed consent to participate in the study. Your clicking on the ‘done’ button at the end of the questionnaire will submit the questionnaire for our inclusion in the study. Participation is entirely voluntary and there are no consequences of your withdrawing from the study prior to clicking the ‘done’ button.

A reminder from SurveyMonkey will be circulated to you to participate in the study if you have agreed to participate but have not had the opportunity to complete the questionnaire.

A list of the research priorities and anonymised accompanying statements will be shown on the web site of the National Council for Osteopathic Research. A paper will also be prepared for publication describing the Delphi process and the findings of the study. Each participant will be forwarded a copy of the published paper and a copy of the project report if they indicate they wish to receive these documents. This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Brighton Faculty of Health Research Ethics and Governance Committee (FREGC-11-046).

If you would like any further information about the study before deciding to take part, please contact Carol Fawkes by email (c.a.fawkes@brighton.ac.uk) or by telephone (01273 643457 or 07732178308).

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* The full research team is composed of Professor Ann Moore, the principal investigator, Dr Alison Rushton, Dr Dawn Carnes, Carol Fawkes, and Mrs Shirly Mathias.
**Appendix 4: Delphi Questionnaire- Round 1 – (amended 26.03.2012)**

**Round 1:**

Can you list up to 10 priorities/priority areas for osteopathic research which you feel would be beneficial in building the evidence base for osteopathy. **Please add the rationale behind your choice.**

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<th>Research priority/priority area</th>
<th>Rationale for choice</th>
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**Round 2**

Following Round 1, a series of research priorities were identified by each of the participants in this study. These have been collected together. In this Round 2 of the study, could you rank the importance you feel all of the priority areas hold for the profession.

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<tr>
<th>Research priority</th>
<th>Disagree strongly</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
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The final number of questions will depend on the number of research priorities identified by all of the participants.