



What is the difference between osteopaths, chiropractors, and physiotherapists?

by Dawn Carnes and Carol Fawkes

- **Key messages**

- It is clear that there are many similarities between the three professions. The way they describe themselves highlights the differences in their approaches and their underpinning principles and philosophies.
- Where there are areas of similarity, these can be utilised to carry out valuable, large-scale collaborative research.
- The way the NHS describes the osteopathic and chiropractic professions is not necessarily how the professions view themselves.
- It is important for the professions to collect standard data to develop a more complete picture of their everyday practice. This can then be used to provide more accurate information for patients and other interested parties.

This must be one of the most frequently asked questions asked by patients at a first appointment, or when considering making an initial appointment. It is interesting to look at what each profession says about itself, and the table below summarises information provided by the professional body for each group.

Profession	Source	Definition	Scope of practice
Osteopathy	General Osteopathic Council (GOsC) [http://www.osteopathy.org.uk/information/about-osteopathy/ accessed 25.4.12]	“Osteopathy is a system of diagnosis and treatment for a wide range of medical conditions. It works with the structure and function of the body, and is based on the principle that the well-being of an individual depends on the skeleton, muscles, ligaments and connective tissues functioning smoothly together.”	“To an osteopath, for your body to work well, its structure must also work well. So osteopaths work to restore your body to a state of balance, where possible without the use of drugs or surgery. Osteopaths use touch, physical manipulation, stretching and massage to increase the mobility of joints, to relieve muscle tension, to enhance the blood and nerve supply to tissues, and to help your body’s own healing mechanisms. They may also provide advice on posture and exercise to aid recovery, promote health and prevent symptoms recurring.”
Chiropractic	General Chiropractic Council (GCC) [http://www.gcc-uk.org/page.cfm?page_id=4 accessed 25.4.12]	“Chiropractic is a primary health-care profession that specialises in the diagnosis, treatment and overall management of conditions that are due to problems with the joints, ligaments, tendons and nerves, especially related to the spine.”	“Chiropractic treatment mainly involves safe, often gentle, specific spinal manipulation to free joints in the spine or other areas of the body that are not moving properly. Apart from manipulation, chiropractors may use a variety of techniques including ice, heat, ultrasound, exercise and acupuncture as well as advice about posture and lifestyle. Although chiropractors are best known for treating back and neck pain, which they do very well, patients also consult chiropractors regarding a range of other, related conditions.”
Physiotherapy	Chartered Society of physiotherapists (CSP) [http://www.csp.org.uk/your-health/what-physiotherapy accessed 25.4.12]	“Physiotherapy helps restore movement and function to as near normal as possible when someone is affected by injury, illness or by developmental or other disability.”	“Physiotherapists (" <i>physios</i> ") work in a wide variety of health settings such as: intensive care, mental illness, stroke recovery, occupational health and care of the elderly. They combine their knowledge, skills and approach to improve a broad range of physical problems associated with different 'systems' of the body. In particular they treat: neuromuscular (brain and nervous system), musculoskeletal (soft tissues, joints and bones), cardiovascular and

			<p>respiratory systems (heart and lungs and associated physiology).” “Contemporary physiotherapy practice may have developed a great deal from its early roots but the four broad 'pillars' granted to the profession by Royal Charter in 1920 still have validity today: massage, exercise and movement, electrotherapy and kindred methods of treatment.”</p>
--	--	--	---

It is noticeable that there are considerable similarities between the three professions. Although professional groups do not want to lose their professional identity; it is important to recognise where there are areas of similarity and how these can be utilised to undertake large scale collaborative research such as the UK BEAM trial (2004). This study showed the effectiveness of a manipulation package of care for low back pain. The manipulation package was developed and delivered by osteopaths, chiropractors and physiotherapists. The new NHS commissioning policy is looking for professional groups to deliver specific services irrespective of profession for example services for neck and back pain (these contracts are being put out to tender from October 1st this year by some commissioning consortia). The commissioners will not select clinical services on the basis of profession but by supportive evidence of effectiveness, safety service delivery and patient reported outcome data and satisfaction. The osteopathic profession has a great deal to offer as the healthcare picture in the United Kingdom changes: recognising the strengths of osteopathy, the strengths of other professionals and working collaboratively may help to promote the ethos and principles of osteopathic health care.

The way professions are described by other groups may not always match the way individual professions describe themselves. NHS Choices is described as 'the online "front door" to the NHS'.

<http://www.nhs.uk/aboutNHSChoices/Pages/NHSChoicesintroduction.aspx>

It is the United Kingdom's largest health website providing some information to help make choices about healthcare. Each professional group is described in the table below.

Definitions from NHS Choices website

Profession	Definition	Scope of practice
Osteopathy	<p>Osteopathy is a way of detecting, treating and preventing health problems by moving, stretching and massaging a person's muscles and joints.</p> <p>Osteopaths believe that problems with the way bones, muscles and joints fit and work together can affect all other parts of the body. They believe their treatments allow the body to heal itself. Osteopaths use a range of techniques but do not use drugs or surgery.</p>	<p>Most people who see an osteopath do so for help with back pain or other problems related to muscles and joints. Some osteopaths also claim to treat a wide range of health conditions, including asthma, digestive problems and peri pain.</p> <p>Osteopathy is a complementary or alternative medicine (CAM), and is different from conventional western medicine. Osteopaths may use some conventional medical techniques, but the use of osteopathy is not always based on science.</p>
Chiropractic	<p>According to the General Chiropractic Council, chiropractic is 'a health profession concerned with the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mechanical disorders of the musculoskeletal system, and the effects of these disorders on the function of the nervous system and general health'.</p>	<p>Chiropractors (practitioners of chiropractic) use their hands to treat disorders of the bones, muscles and joints. Treatments that involve use of the hands in this way are called 'manual therapies'. Chiropractors use a range of techniques, with an emphasis on manipulation of the spine. They may also offer advice on diet, exercise and lifestyle, and rehabilitation programmes that involve exercises to do in your own time.</p> <p>Chiropractic is a complementary or alternative medicine (CAM). This means that chiropractic is different in important ways from treatments that are part of conventional western medicine. The use and principles of chiropractic are not always based on scientific evidence.</p>
Physiotherapy	<p>Physiotherapy, often referred to as physio, uses physical methods, such as massage and manipulation, to promote healing and wellbeing. Physiotherapy treatments are often used to help restore a person's range of movement after injury or illness.</p>	<p>Physiotherapists frequently treat problems that affect: muscles, joints and the heart, blood circulation and lungs.</p> <p>Physiotherapists also help people with mental health conditions, neurological conditions (those affecting the brain and nervous system) and chronic (long-term) health conditions.</p> <p>Physiotherapists use a wide range of techniques and approaches, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • massage and manipulation, using the hands to relieve muscle pain and

	<p>Physiotherapists are healthcare professionals who have trained specifically in physiotherapy. They work in a number of different places, including: hospitals, GP surgeries, private practices, workplaces and the community.</p>	<p>stiffness and encourage blood flow to an injured part of the body to help recovery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• heat, cold, electric current, light and water• remedial exercise (exercise that takes into account a person's current level of health and any specific requirements they may have)• providing support to help patients manage chronic conditions
--	--	--

The NHS Choices website limits the majority of osteopathic practice to back pain, it does not appreciate the other aspects of the musculoskeletal system which osteopaths treat, or the packages of care including advice, education, and, in some cases exercises, which are part of the everyday management of patients. A more accurate profile of everyday osteopathic practice was recorded in the national pilot of the standardised data collection tool undertaken by NCOR in 2009.

http://www.ncor.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/standardised_data_collection_finalreport_24062010.pdf

This incomplete picture of everyday clinical practice emphasises the importance for all professions to collect data which describes their practice e.g. the patients they see, their presenting symptoms, how they are managed, and the outcomes they achieve. This is simple information which can be enormously helpful to provide accurate information to patients, and other individuals or groups interested in osteopathy.

References

UK BEAM Trial Team. United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) randomised trial: cost effectiveness of physical treatments for back pain in primary care. *British Medical Journal*. 2004;329(7479):1381.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15556954>

UK BEAM Trial Team. United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) randomised trial: effectiveness of physical treatments for back pain in primary care. *British Medical Journal*. 2004;329(7479):1377. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15556955>