

# Statement of Scope of Practice in Osteopathy



January 2023

This statement is for health professionals, third party funders and policy makers. It gives an overview of osteopathic practice and its place within Australia's health, aged care and disability systems.

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

Osteopathy is a healthcare profession that is underpinned by biopsychosocial and holistic principles, and that focuses on the health and mobility of the body's neuro-musculoskeletal systems. Osteopathic healthcare includes thorough primary care and functional assessments and the application of a range of manual and movement-based therapies, prevention and health promotion strategies tailored to the individual, that aim to optimise functional and health outcomes.

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

Osteopaths are autonomous primary contract practitioners who treat clients across the life span. Approximately 90% of clients 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 or management provided with clients. Scientific plausibility and evidence-informed reasoning are fundamental to diagnosis, treatment and case management.

## Principles of patient care

Osteopaths follow these principles:

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

Osteopaths acknowledge the uniqueness of each client and seek to work with them to optimise their health and wellbeing.

Modern osteopathic practice is informed and improved by the integration of relevant practice guidelines [5]. 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 [6], 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 bachelor's or bachelor's/ master's program. University courses must be accredited by the Australasian Osteopathic Accreditation Council [7].

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. Many osteopaths continue their education while practising by undertaking higher degrees (e.g., PhD, Master's, Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma) by research or in clinical focus areas, or in other clinically related short courses.

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.

---

## 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, disease, and functional impairment are multi-factorial, and an osteopath considers a client's needs and goals 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 that recognises the extensive skill base of the profession and the thorough training that all registered practitioners undertake. 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
- >> Clients' unique health needs
- >> Service requirements of Medicare, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), accident and compensation schemes and other third-party funders

The practice of osteopathy requires broad diagnostic competencies and an understanding of the range of conditions and disabilities that may result in functional and health impairments.

Osteopaths use standard clinical processes in history taking and examination, such as orthopaedic special tests, neurological examinations, functional capacity assessments 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 client'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. Osteopaths assess the cause and impact of temporary and permanent functional impairment, injury or strains and seek to normalise the body's response. Osteopaths also focus on improving functionality for activities of daily living in partnership with the client through a range of therapeutic interventions, self-management approaches and education.

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 clients 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 client'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 [9].

---

Osteopathy is holistic in the sense that health disease and functional impairment are multi-factorial, and an osteopath considers a client's needs and goals in the relevant biopsychosocial context.

---

## Advanced practice in osteopathy

All osteopaths increase their clinical awareness through continuing professional development or additional qualifications. While neuro-musculoskeletal assessment, manual therapy interventions and clinical exercise prescription are core skills for all osteopaths, some osteopaths expand their capabilities for specific client 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 [10].

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. While most osteopaths primarily work as private practitioners, osteopaths may provide services in a broad range of settings. Some osteopaths may work full-time or part-time within specialist pain management services, aged care facilities or occupational health settings, while some osteopaths focus their practice on providing therapeutic supports to people with disabilities.

Osteopaths may also 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 client 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 [11]. 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 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

1. Osteopathy Australia. 2018. *Osteopathic Service Descriptors*. Sydney.
2. UTS Project Team. 2009. *Capabilities for Osteopathic Practice*. University of Technology Sydney. Available from: [http://www.osteopathiccouncil.org.au/files/Capabilities\\_for\\_Osteopathic\\_Practice\\_2009.pdf](http://www.osteopathiccouncil.org.au/files/Capabilities_for_Osteopathic_Practice_2009.pdf)
3. Osteopathy Board of Australia. 2014. *OBA, Code of Conduct for Registered Healthcare Practitioners*. Melbourne.
4. World Health Organisation (WHO). 2010. *Benchmarks for training in osteopathy*. WHO. Geneva.
5. National Health and Medical Research Council clinical guidelines are available from: <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/search>
6. Osteopathy Board of Australia codes and guidelines are available from <http://www.osteopathyboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines.aspx>
7. Australasian Osteopathic Accreditation Council: <http://www.osteopathiccouncil.org.au/accreditation.html>
8. Osteopathy Board of Australia. 2015. *Osteopathy continuing professional development guidelines*. AHPRA (ed). Melbourne. Available from: <http://www.osteopathyboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines.aspx>
9. National Prescribing Service. 2012. *Prescribing competencies framework*. Available from: [http://www.nps.org.au/health\\_professionals/prescribing\\_competencies\\_framework](http://www.nps.org.au/health_professionals/prescribing_competencies_framework).
10. Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. 2015. *Credentialing health practitioners and defining their scope of clinical practice – A guide for managers and practitioners*. Commonwealth of Australia. Sydney.
11. Osteopathic International Alliance. 2012. *Osteopathic International Alliance Status Report: History & Current Context of the Osteopathy Profession*. 2012. Available from <http://oialliance.org/resources/oia-status-report/>

**Osteopathy Australia strives to enhance and promote the profession.**

Osteopathy Australia

PO Box 5044

Chatswood West NSW 1515

p. 61 2 9410 0099

w. [www.osteopathy.org.au](http://www.osteopathy.org.au)

e. [info@osteopathy.org.au](mailto:info@osteopathy.org.au)