



Exploring European Osteopathic Identity: An Analysis of the Professional Websites of European Osteopathic Organizations



Wagner C.¹, van Dun P.L.S.²

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Introduction

A sociologically confirmed identity crisis in osteopathy exists in the USA. The crisis stems from the inadequate demarcation of the practical activity of DOs from the allopathic activity of MDs. In Europe differences in terminology and practices exist within the osteopathic professional group, making communication difficult between osteopaths. However, the distinctive identity of European osteopathy is an important precondition for defining a professional profile that would clearly demarcate osteopathy from other medical occupations and that would also set the ultimate goals of an osteopathic degree program having an ensured level of quality and meeting the requirements for state recognition. The result would be improved communication among the osteopaths themselves and with outsiders, to the benefit of the patients as well. This study explores the current status of osteopathic identity in Europe.

Material and methods

A systematic and comparative analysis of the websites of 29 European osteopathic unions and/or registers (from 19 countries) and 3 international osteopathic organizations was carried out. The analysis was based on a list of questions arranged according to 11 categories (see Table 1), compiled following a systematic and historical analysis of the literature with the focus on terms referring to identity, identity crisis and professionalization. Our predominantly phenomenological approach highlighted these terms in their osteopathic context.

11 categories for the website analysis

What is the definition of osteopathy?
How do osteopaths define themselves?
What is the role of osteopathy in health care?
What is the role of osteopathy in society?
What is the current status of the legal recognition of osteopathy as a profession?
What forms of training and academic degrees currently exist for osteopathy or are goals set for the future?
Special features of the content or presentation of the website
Is there a defined professional profile or code of practice?
Is there a formulated ethical or deontological code?
Is there a public list of osteopaths?
Goals and admission criteria of a professional union

Table 1: List of questions for the website analysis

Content of the definition of osteopathy	PUR		EFO	FORE	WOHO
	%	n			
Manual / by hand (in practice)	69	20			x
System of diagnosis and treatment	66	19			
Causative / non-symptomatic treatment	55	16		x	x
Science / knowledge of sciences	52	15			
Form of therapeutic method / treatment	38	11			
Holism / global approach	34	10			
Form of medicine / medical	31	9			
System of treatment (no diagnosis mentioned)	31	9		x	x
System of health care / caring approach / system of healing	21	6		x	x
Drugless / no surgery	17	5		x	
Osteopathy as symptomatic treatment	7	2			
Content of the definition of osteopath					
Osteopath	69	20		x	x
Holder of the DO title	17	5			
Professional / health professional	14	4		x	
Practitioner	7	2		x	
Therapist	3	1			
Primary health care practitioner	-	-		x	
Osteopathic physician	-	-			
Criteria of osteopathic role in health care					
Osteopathy as first-line-medical care	24	7		x	
CAM	7	2			
Complementary	24	7			
Alternative	-	-			
Non-conventional medicine	10	3			

Table 2: List of criteria as main results from 3 categories (definition of osteopathy, definition of osteopath, the role of osteopathy in health care) of 11 categories in total. Key: PUR = professional unions and registers (n = 29), EFO = European Federation of Osteopaths, FORE = Forum for Osteopathic Regulation in Europe, WOHO = World Osteopathic Health Organization.

Results

Identity is a collective notion encompassing personal, collective and professional identity. The term "identity" refers to a state of unity, continuity and coherence. Identity is inconceivable without the setting of boundaries and the formation of oppositions. There exist identity-constituting features of osteopathy that altogether make up its distinctive identity. The professional unions and registers and international osteopathic organizations do not uniformly characterize osteopathy, however. They agree most (69%) with one another in defining osteopathy as being 'manual in practice'. 66% of these registers and organizations describe osteopathy as a 'system of diagnosis and treatment'. In contrast, 31% describe osteopathy as a 'system of treatment' (no diagnosis is mentioned). 31% define osteopathy as form of medicine, and 38% define it as a form of 'therapeutic method or treatment'. Only 24% see the role of osteopathy to lie in first-line medical care. 24% define osteopathy as complementary and 7% as complementary and/or alternative (see Table 2). The form of recognition of osteopathy also varies: In some countries osteopathy is an independent profession and in others it represents only further training for other health professions (i.e. physiotherapy).

Conclusions

Significant intra-professional differences exist in the presentation of European osteopathy among the numerous osteopathic organizations. The existence of these differences conflicts with the idea of a collective identity. The criteria for a professionalization of osteopathy as an academic profession are not fulfilled at present. We conclude that osteopathy is undergoing a crisis of identity in Europe that can only be resolved creatively, through a common orientation of professional values.

1 Member of CORPP vzw

2 Secretary and co-founder of CORPP vzw

COMMISSION FOR OSTEOPATHIC RESEARCH PRACTICE AND PROMOTION v.z.w.

Kon. Astridlaan 148/002, 2800 Mechelen, Belgium

info@corpp.org www.corpp.org