



**General
Chiropractic
Council**

Public perceptions research

Enhancing professionalism

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1. Introduction

The delivery of excellent patient care lies at the centre of chiropractic services. Chiropractors up and down the country demonstrate professionalism and a clear commitment to providing a high standard of safe and effective treatment.

Putting patient health interests first is an important principle for chiropractic professionals. It promotes and encourages trust and upholds the reputation of the profession.

Registrants' ability to continually improve and enhance patient care is significantly strengthened if we know what people value when they look for and visit a chiropractor for treatment. That's why it is important that we listen to and understand public perceptions of chiropractic services.

The GCC recently commissioned research from djs research to explore public perceptions and awareness of chiropractic services. The experiences of patients who have visited a chiropractor for treatment were also surveyed.

The findings are set out in this report and provide useful insights that will support registrants to deliver high quality patient care. The research also forms part of our commitment to use evidence and insight to guide our work at the GCC – to protect the health and safety of the public by ensuring high standards of practice in the chiropractic profession.

It is clear from the research that good progress is being made in many areas. Awareness of the role of a chiropractor is growing and the data shows more people are visiting a chiropractor than in previous years. Critically, a large majority of the general public agree that chiropractic is a trusted profession. Of course, there is still work to do. For example, although many people know what a chiropractor does, there is less understanding around the different conditions that a chiropractor can treat.

For many patients, it's not just about receiving effective treatment. The findings send a clear message that the public also value good communication and shared decision making with a registered chiropractor. We will be doing more work on this in the coming months.

I hope you find this report useful; the research findings identify opportunities to enhance the chiropractic profession so that patients continue to receive excellent care now and in the future.

Nick Jones
Chief Executive and Registrar
General Chiropractic Council

2. Purpose of the research

In 2020, we commissioned new research from djs research to better understand the public's views and experiences of the chiropractic profession. The research explores general public perceptions and awareness of chiropractic services and examines the experiences of members of the public who have visited a chiropractor for treatment.

The purpose of the research is to help us and you, in your work as a chiropractor, better understand patient views, needs and concerns around the chiropractic profession.

The aims of the research included:

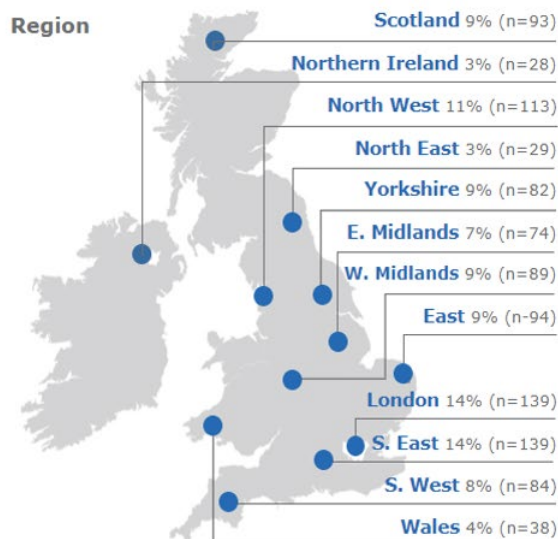
- To determine the level of awareness of chiropractors and perceptions of what chiropractors do, building on previous research
- To understand what the public expects from a regulatory body e.g. information needs; benefits of seeing a registered professional; confidence in the profession
- To provide recommendations to improve the GCC as a regulator and ensure that the public understands what we are and what we do
- To benchmark public perceptions in order to track how these might change in the future.

3. Methodology

The national online public survey was conducted by djs research in 2020 with a nationally representative sample of 1,002 UK adults (aged 16+). From this sample, 243 UK adults have received chiropractic treatment and were surveyed on their experiences of visiting a chiropractor.

As outlined below, quotas were assigned to generate a nationally representative sample by age, gender and region.

Regional breakdown



Age breakdown

Age

NET: 16-34	NET: 35-54	NET: 55+
n=308 (31%)	n=340 (34%)	n=354 (35%)

Gender breakdown



4. Key findings

The research is wide-ranging. As well as exploring general awareness and perceptions of the chiropractic profession, the research also gathers useful insights about factors such as patient communication, regulation of the profession and expectations of chiropractic treatment.

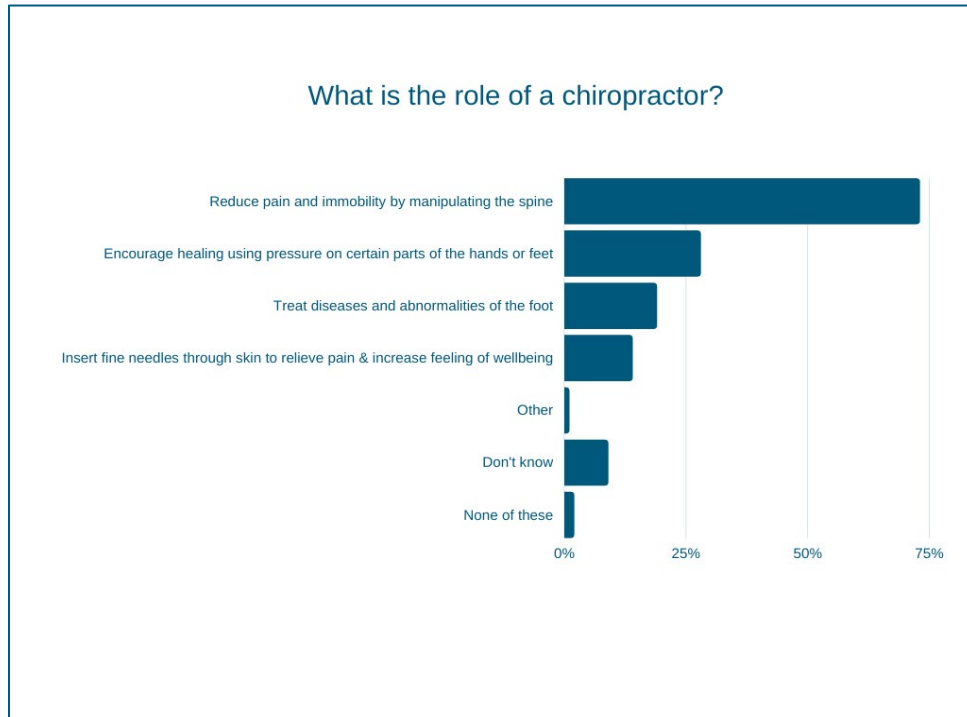
4.1 Awareness of the role of a chiropractor

There are good awareness levels of the role of a chiropractor and the research suggests that this awareness is growing. When asked to spontaneously describe the role of a chiropractor over half of those surveyed recognise that chiropractors are able *to treat back and spine issues* and can help *to reduce aches and pains or manipulate the body*.

When prompted with a list of statements about chiropractic, awareness increases significantly, with three-quarters of people (73%) correctly identifying that reducing *'pain and immobility by manipulating the spine'* is an accurate description of what chiropractors do. In 2004, public awareness of a chiropractor's role was considerably lower, with 66% of people correctly identifying the same description.

As one may expect, awareness of chiropractic increases with age. People under the age of 55 were less likely than those aged 55 or older to be aware of what chiropractors do.

There remains some confusion about the role of a chiropractor and that of a chiropodist. A minority of people (19%) are of the view that a chiropractor is responsible for treating diseases and abnormalities of the foot.



What people say about the role of chiropractors

"They use manual techniques to realign and adjust your spine and diagnose disorders."

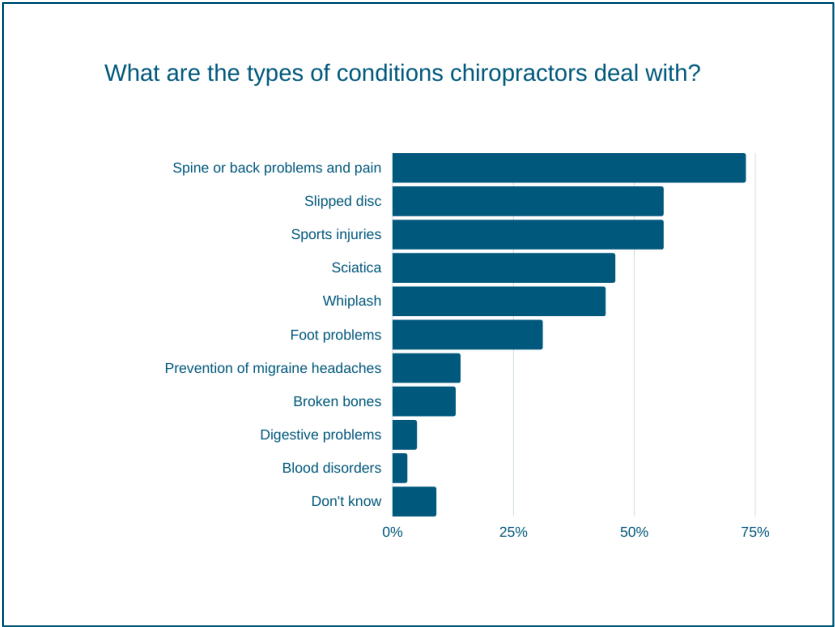
-65+, FEMALE, SOUTH EAST

"Care for people's backs through massage, healing bones and joints etc."

- 35-44, MALE, SOUTH WEST

Understanding of conditions that a chiropractor can treat

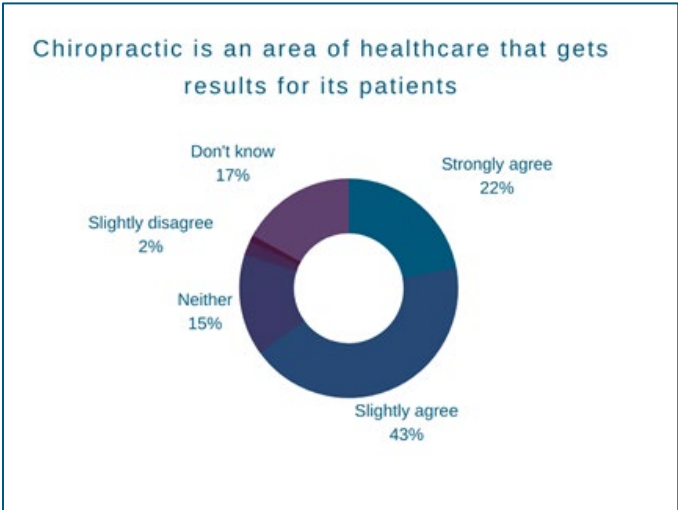
Although the majority of people have an understanding of the role of a chiropractor, there is less understanding about the types of conditions that a chiropractor is able to treat. Three-quarters of respondents (73%) recognise that a chiropractor deals with *spine or back problems or pain*. Around half of those questioned recognise that a chiropractor is able to treat conditions such as a slipped disc, sports injuries or sciatica.



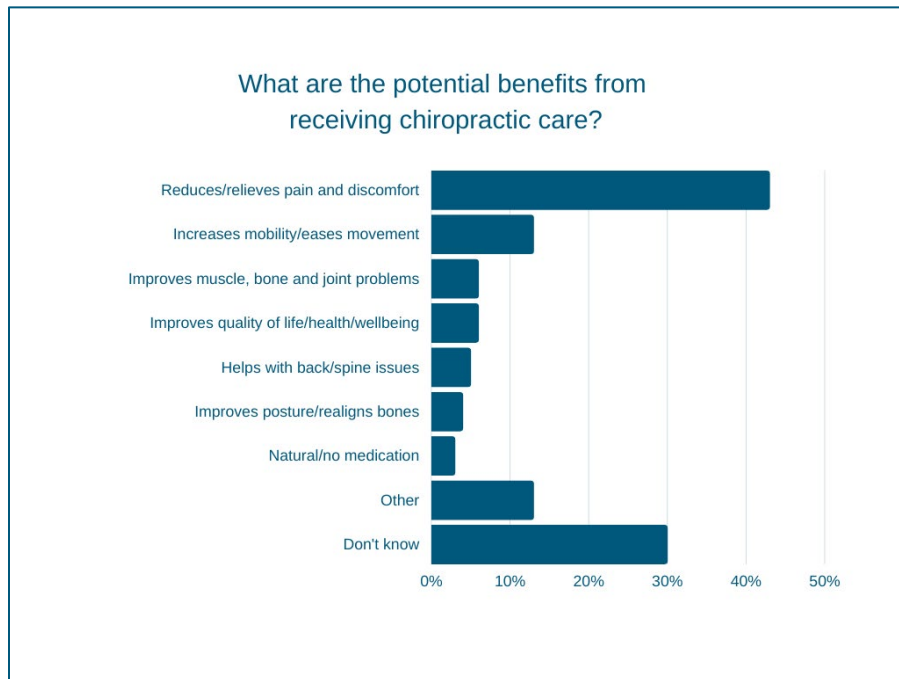
4.2 A trusted profession

The survey reveals high levels of public trust towards the chiropractic profession. Eighty-one per cent of respondents agree with the statement that chiropractic is an area of healthcare that they trust.

Results are slightly more varied when respondents are asked about the impact and benefits of chiropractic treatment. The majority of people recognise the benefits of visiting a chiropractor; one in six agree that chiropractic is an area of healthcare that gets results for its patients. However, 17% of the people surveyed do not know the impact of chiropractic treatment.



Reducing and relieving pain and discomfort is overwhelmingly considered the primary benefit of visiting a chiropractor. Significantly fewer people recognise that a visit to a chiropractor can also increase mobility, improve muscle and joint problems as well as improve quality of life. Almost a third of people do not know the benefits of chiropractic treatment.



Key learnings

Increasing levels of awareness and positive perceptions of the profession are very encouraging.

The findings suggest a clear need to communicate the benefits to patients of chiropractic treatment and improve understanding of the specific conditions that a chiropractor can treat.

Building relationships and sharing knowledge with other healthcare professionals is one way to improve understanding of a chiropractor's expertise and the benefits of chiropractic treatment.

This information is often passed on to patients through referrals.

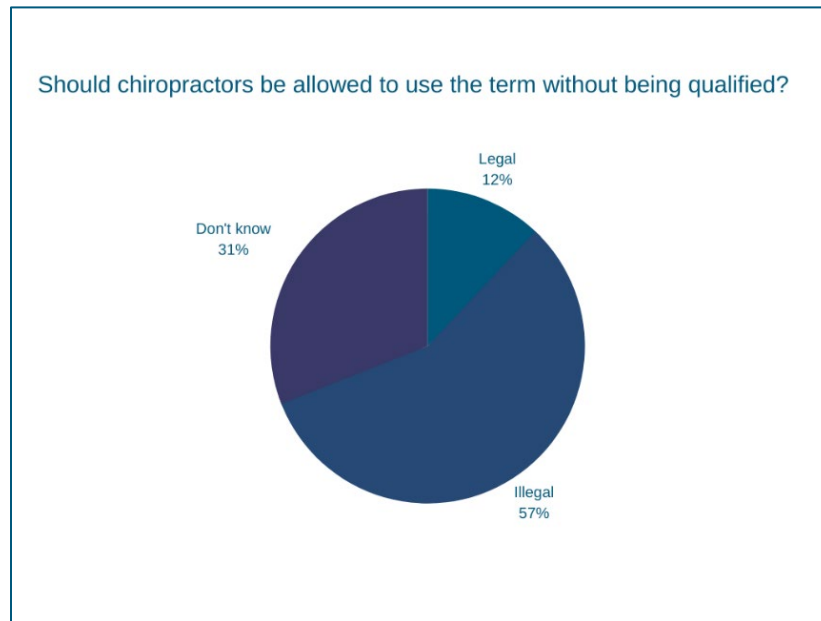
The personal experiences of patients are a powerful way to highlight the benefits of visiting a chiropractor. More can be done to encourage patients to share their stories either through GCC channels and/or through chiropractic practices and websites.

4.3 The importance of qualifications

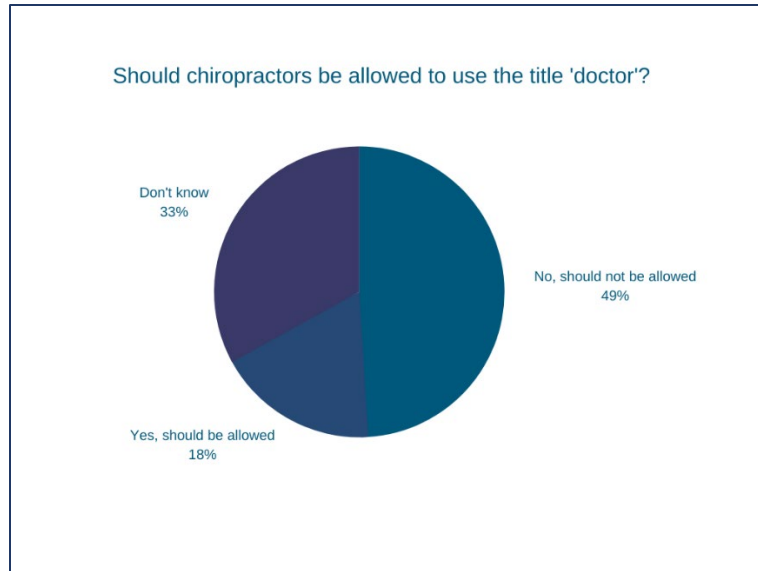
The research tells us that qualifications matter. People want to know that their chiropractor is professionally qualified before they embark on chiropractic treatment.

It's clear that having a recognised qualification is one of the most important attributes for people when considering seeing a chiropractor for treatment. Having a recognised qualification scores 83 against 100 on a scale of importance. There is growing awareness of qualifications in the chiropractic profession. Sixty-one per cent of people now recognise that chiropractors must be qualified in order to treat patients. This is an 11% increase from 2004.

More than half of the people who took part in the research know that it is illegal for chiropractors to use the term without being professionally qualified. Whilst this is encouraging, there is still a significant number of people who either do not know a chiropractor can only use the term if they are qualified or think that the law allows people to describe themselves as a chiropractor without being professionally qualified.



Members of the public were also asked whether chiropractors should be allowed to use the title 'doctor'. Forty-nine per cent of people do not believe chiropractor should use the title 'doctor'.



Key learnings

Chiropractic professionals must maintain the highest standards of professional conduct, which includes being properly qualified, registered and insured.

Growing awareness of qualifications in the chiropractic profession is a positive development which helps to give chiropractic greater credibility among the public.

Highlighting a chiropractor's qualifications and using the approved *I'm registered with the GCC* logo in patient communications may be beneficial to both registrants and patients.

Chiropractors should remind themselves of the CAP guidance regarding the use of the term 'Dr'. The guidance is clear that chiropractors who wish to use the courtesy title in their advertising should take care not to imply that they hold a general medical qualification if they do not.

4.4 The power of communication

Effective communication between chiropractors and patients can lead to both improved patient satisfaction, and better outcomes.

Understanding treatment options, timescales and costs

It is clear from the research that communication before and throughout treatment is valued. Specifically, people want to be fully informed before embarking on any treatment, including

understanding their treatment options, the timescales for treatment and the cost. These factors are all considered important when visiting a chiropractor.

1-100 sliding scale; 100 = very important

Importance of communications when considering treatment

	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Clear information on cost is provided up front (83)								●		
All treatment options are fully explained up front (82)								●		
Clear information on timescales for treatment provided up front (77)							●			

Patients' actual experience is very positive. In practice, many patients report good levels of communications with their chiropractor. When describing their experiences of visiting a chiropractor more than four-fifths of patients agree they had been given adequate information about treatment options (82%) and costs (80%). The number is slightly lower with regards information on timescales (74%).

Communicating potential risks

The findings show that patients want to understand the potential risks of treatment – alongside information on cost, this is the most important factor for patients considering chiropractic care. In fact, having any risks communicated before embarking on treatment scores 83 out of 100 on a scale of importance.

Many patients report receiving this information from their chiropractor. Seventy per cent of those who have received chiropractic treatment agree that risks were communicated before treatment commenced.

Key learnings

Good communication between chiropractor and patient is important. This is made clear in *The Code - Standards of conduct, performance and ethics for chiropractors*, which outlines the importance of communicating effectively with patients in order to establish and maintain a professional relationship and encourage patients to take an informed role in their care.

From the moment of initial enquiry right through to the end of treatment, clear and effective communication is key to building a relationship with patients and developing trust and

confidence. By providing the right level of information at the right time, chiropractors are able to support patients to make informed decisions about their treatment.

These insights demonstrate that clear communication with patients should be a priority for chiropractors. Effective communication will also help registrants meet their obligations under the Code.

4.5 Visiting a chiropractor

The research explores the expectations and experiences of patients who have visited a chiropractor - from their initial search for a chiropractor to their ongoing treatment.

Just as awareness around the role of a chiropractor has grown in recent years the number of people visiting a chiropractor for treatment is also increasing. In 2004, 85% of people had never visited a chiropractor but in 2020 this number falls to 71%.

As one would expect, age makes a difference. Patients aged between 35-54 are most likely to visit a chiropractor. The under 35s are least likely to say that they have visited a chiropractor.

The expectation amongst a third of those who have visited a chiropractor is that they would visit at least once a week. The research implies high levels of patient satisfaction with four in five patients using the same chiropractor throughout their treatment.

Shared decision making

The research suggests that many patients want to have an active role in the decisions around their treatment. On a 1-100 scale of importance, patients score shared decision-making with input from both practitioner and patient highly.

1-100 sliding scale; 100 = very important

Importance of shared decision making

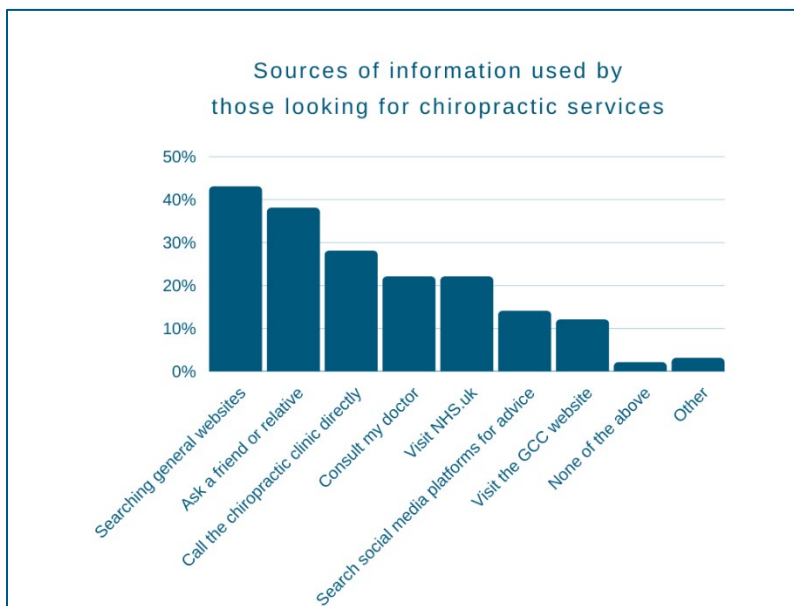
	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Decision-making is shared process with input from both (76)							●			

Many chiropractors already involve their patients in decisions about their care. Seventy-seven per cent of patients agree that decision-making was a shared input from both parties.

Sources of information about a chiropractor

Only a small number of those surveyed (15%) have actively sought information on a chiropractor. As expected, those who are aware of what chiropractors do are significantly more likely to search for information on a chiropractor than those who were not aware (23% vs. 3%, respectively).

For those people who have actively sought information, general websites are the most common channel to find out information about a chiropractor, but referrals remain important too. Over a third of people have asked a family member or friend for details of a chiropractor.



For those not actively seeking information about a chiropractor, over half the people surveyed (51%) are more likely to consult their GP.

The active role of patients

The research suggests that many patients are looking for more than just chiropractic treatment when they visit a chiropractor. In fact, the importance of receiving care that includes exercises and self-management advice scores highly (74) on a 1-100 scale of importance.

When discussing their experience of visiting a chiropractor 76% of patients report receiving general health advice from their chiropractor.

Patients also place high importance on chiropractors explaining how treatment works using research evidence. This scores 77 on a 1-100 scale of importance.

1-100 sliding scale; 100 = very important

Importance of treatment advice

	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
How treatment works is explained using research evidence (77)							●			
Care also includes exercises and self-management advice (74)							●			

Key learnings

It is clear from the research that, when visiting a chiropractor, the expectations of patients go beyond simply receiving treatment. Most patients want to be informed about their treatment options using research evidence and they want to use this information to be part of the decision-making process about their treatment.

The active role of the patient is also demonstrated by the desire to receive exercises and self-management advice which will enable patients to take control of their conditions.

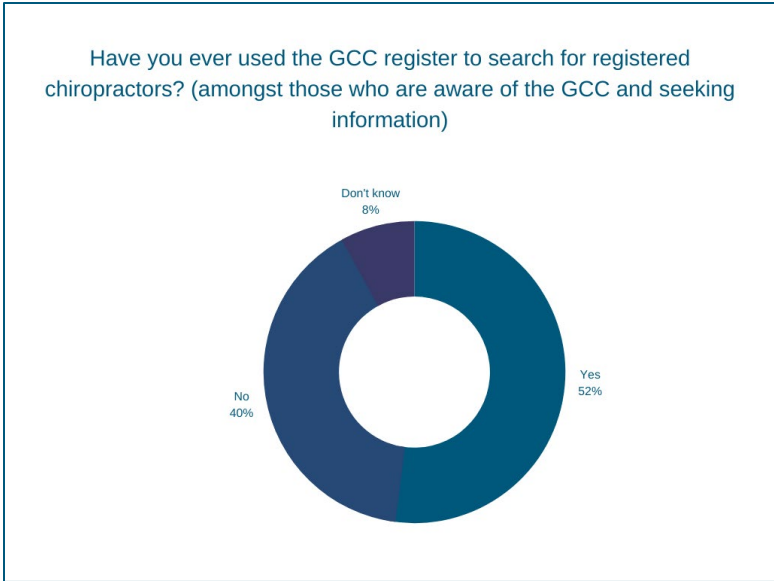
4.6 The role of regulation

Regulated professions give people confidence. Most people (79%) believe that regulation and professional standards have a positive impact on care.

Almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents recognise that chiropractic is an area of healthcare that is regulated and one in seven (14%) are aware of the GCC. It is worth noting that those who have visited a chiropractor are significantly more likely than those who never have to have prior knowledge of the GCC (35% vs. 8%, respectively).

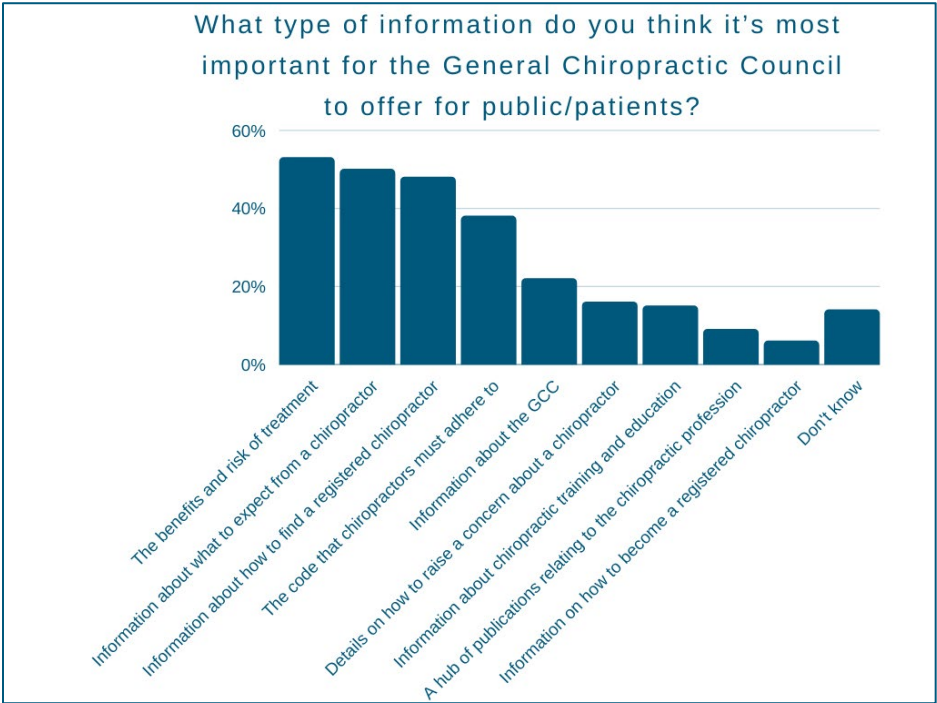
It is important to patients that, before considering treatment, they are able to check that a practitioner is registered with the GCC. Specifically, the ability to check a practitioner is registered with the GCC scores highly (81) on a 1-100 scale of importance.

Just over half of those questioned (52%) report using the GCC online register to search for registered chiropractors (among those aware of the GCC and seeking information about chiropractic treatment). Over a third of patients who have never checked the GCC register use other trusted sources about the practice.



Information provided by the GCC

Members of the public were asked about the types of information they think it is important for the GCC to offer to the public and patients. Over half of respondents would like information on the benefits and risks of treatment. Information on what to expect when visiting a chiropractor and how to find a registered chiropractor also ranked highly.



Key learnings

The public recognise the positive impact that a regulator has on standards of care and the ability to check that a chiropractor is registered is important to patients. Registrants may wish to use the approved *I'm registered with the GCC* logo in practices and on their website to show patients and members of the public that they have valid registration with the GCC.

These insights will also inform the work of the GCC, specifically around how we communicate with and inform the public.

5. Summary of key learnings

Awareness of the role of a chiropractor

- Patients should be encouraged to share their stories either through GCC channels and/or through chiropractic practices and websites in order to highlight the benefits of visiting a chiropractor.
- Building relationships and sharing knowledge with other healthcare professionals is one way to improve understanding of a chiropractor's expertise and the benefits of chiropractic treatment.

Qualifications

- Highlighting qualifications and using the approved *I'm registered with the GCC* logo in patient communications may be beneficial to both registrants and patients, and demonstrates the highest standards of professional conduct.
- Chiropractors should remind themselves of the CAP guidance regarding the use of the term 'Dr'.

Communication

- From the moment of initial enquiry right through to the end of treatment, clear and effective communication is key to building a relationship with patients and developing trust and confidence.
- Patients want to make informed decisions about their treatment. This includes information about the cost and timescales of treatment.

Visiting a chiropractor

- Most patients want to be informed about their treatment options using research evidence and they want to use this information to be part of the decision-making process about their treatment.
- Registrant can help patients take control of their conditions by offering exercises and self-management advice.

The role of regulation

- Registrants may wish to use the approved *I'm registered with the GCC* logo in practices and on their website to show patients and members of the public that they have valid registration with the GCC.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the findings offer a largely positive picture of the chiropractic profession. Awareness of chiropractic is increasing, and many people recognise the benefits of visiting a chiropractor.

Public trust is critical to the long-term success of many professions, but it can be hard to achieve and maintain. Patients and the public trust that health professionals will practise competently and behave appropriately towards them. For this trust to be developed and maintained, it is important that chiropractic professionals behave in a way that promotes the best care of patients and upholds the reputation of the profession.

The high level of public trust in chiropractic services is therefore very encouraging and is testament to the good quality care that is being delivered by chiropractors.

But it's not just excellent care that matters for people. A clear message from the research is that patients want to have an active role in their treatment. They are customers, as well as patients. They want to be fully informed about their treatment, including the risks and benefits, and to be part of the decision-making process. Other factors are also important; people using a chiropractor need clear information to help them decide to have treatment in the first place and there's a need for transparency, for instance about the cost of care and the chiropractor's qualifications.

Insights from the research will be used at the GCC to inform the way in which we can support the profession and continue to improve the information we provide for people interested in chiropractic. There is an opportunity for us to provide more information aimed at patients and

the public about chiropractic care, including the benefits and risks of treatment. This will enable more people to access trusted information on chiropractic as a treatment option and support the chiropractic profession.