

How is touch communicated in the context of manual therapy?

An executive summary of the literature review

Dr Michael Concannon, University of Huddersfield

Background

The aim of this literature review was to explore the essential aspects of professional and person-centred care that relate to communication and miscommunication in the context of touch in manual therapy. It was designed to establish what information was available and how it may inform changes, for example, to policy by the professions' statutory regulators, the production of guidance and curricula. The aim is to support enhanced communication between professional and patient and to ensure appropriate boundaries are not crossed.

- The first review question: How is touch communicated and received by both patient and healthcare practitioner, in the context of touch-based therapies?
- The second review question: How does the literature inform the potential implications for the regulator, educational and professional bodies and other groups and for healthcare practitioners?

Methods

A robust method was used to search bibliographic databases using specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Two independent reviewers screened all abstracts and full text papers for suitability. Disagreements were resolved through deliberation and a final record of eligible papers was made. Extraction of qualitative data was synthesised into a contextual narrative relating to the primary and secondary review questions. The researchers provide a critical narrative on reliability, validity and potential projection to wider populations. The synthesis of the evidence describes five key aspects:

- i. the volume and characteristics of the overall evidence base
- ii. what the evidence base indicates in relation to the research questions
- iii. the implications of the findings for policy and/or practice
- iv. identification of key gaps in the literature
- v. suggestions for further research.

Results

Thirty-eight articles were included in the final review with a mixture of methods and approaches. Three main themes emerged from the review:

- touch and professional boundaries
- communication and education and
- practice and regulation.

Overall the literature review shows that touch is multi-faceted making it a complex phenomenon to investigate. Research has explored the centrality of touch to manual therapies and positive as well as negative aspects of touch in the context of touch and professional boundaries. For example, the ways in which touch is found to convey significant intimacy, empathy and care, with a distinction between 'procedural' and 'expressive' touch.

The review found that despite the importance of effective patient-centred communication in healthcare practice, there is limited published research that enhances the understanding of communication in relation to touch and professional boundaries specifically within osteopathy and chiropractic therapies for professionals and patients. There is also a paucity of research targeting the exploration of the experience and understanding of osteopaths and chiropractors and patients in boundary violations.

The review has identified relevant issues for training and education in communication supporting the understanding of the 'why' not just the 'what' and the importance of understanding and communicating what the patient wants. This could include consideration of different ways of supporting professionals to explore issues, for example through reflection on case studies or vignettes.

Findings on practice and regulation focus on how concerns about the clinical conduct of osteopaths and chiropractors centre on communication and the ways in which regulators and others might provide additional support and guidance for professionals in this area.

Implications for further research, and UK policy and practice

To further understand the implications of touch in manual therapies, research into opinions and experiences of patients being touched by their healthcare practitioner needs to be built upon, particularly in the UK where very little such literature exists. It appears apposite for the suggested research to focus particularly on the manual therapy professions, such as osteopathy and chiropractic.

Conclusion

There is a paucity of direct and indirect literature that is available to contribute to the full knowledge of how communication is given and received in manual therapies. Manual therapy practice could support the wellbeing of the human condition, so there needs to be better research available to inform the complexity of how this relationship is effectively managed. There appears to be a tacit acceptance of the complex processes that are involved, but poor evidence to support the development of this fundamental concern.

The findings of the review are drawn from various areas of professional and healthcare practice, much of which sits outside of osteopathy and chiropractic. Although providing useful discursive and descriptive information, the studies do not fully identify with the review questions.¹

¹ Funding and conflict of interest: This project was commissioned by the General Osteopathic Council and the General Chiropractic Council. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.