

GOsC response to Scottish Government consultation on Patients' Rights Bill

1. Right to accessible NHS care & waiting time guarantee

- The General Osteopathic Council supports the Scottish Government's proposal for a Patient Rights' Bill to provide accessible and timely health services for all. As the statutory regulator of the osteopathic profession, we often hear from patients who seek osteopathic care because they do not have access to timely treatment within the NHS system.
- Whilst our remit as a statutory regulator does not include promotion of osteopathy, we do have a role in promoting high standards of care for patients seeking osteopathic treatment. We know that patients with musculoskeletal disorders in Scotland experience difficulty in accessing treatment. And in the absence of NHS funding for care, such as osteopathy, this effective treatment, both in terms of outcome and cost, will remain available only to those who can afford to pay.
- A maximum waiting period of 12 weeks for in-patient and day cases would provide faster access to treatment, but this target would only be feasible with sufficient availability of clinical specialists.
- Whilst policy should be tailor-made to the healthcare needs of Scotland, it is worth noting that policy makers in England and Wales have recognised the need to provide access to a wider range of health professionals to tackle today's musculoskeletal crisis¹. The Department of Health's Musculoskeletal Services Framework², for example, promotes the development of multidisciplinary teams, which include osteopaths. The Department of Health's 18 weeks team is also showing increasing interest in a multidisciplinary back pain service funded by Plymouth Primary Care Trust. This service includes osteopaths working alongside GPs and cognitive behavioural therapists. Regular audits of this service have shown a reduction in secondary referrals and positive feedback from patient surveys³. If the Health Policy and Strategy Directorate wish for further information on this service, we would be happy to provide relevant contact details.

2. Right to be treated with dignity & respect

- A right to dignity and respect are fundamental to patient-centred care.

¹In Scotland, 60-80% of adults of working age suffer with back pain. Working Backs Scotland, 2007.

²The Musculoskeletal Services Framework. A joint responsibility: doing it differently. Department of Health, July 2006.

³Plymouth Acute & sub-acute back pain service. Journal of Orthopaedic Medicine, 2006.

- Patients' decisions should also be respected. With an increasingly well-informed public, if patients feel that they might benefit from other forms of care, whether NHS-funded or private, GPs should feel confident in making the appropriate referrals where the care is statutory regulated and has an evidence base, as is the case with osteopathy. Unfortunately, we still hear of instances where patients in Scotland are actively discouraged, by GPs, from seeking osteopathic care, and as a result they do not inform their GP they are seeking this type of treatment. Communication between patients and all healthcare professionals providing care should be actively encouraged to help achieve the rights proposed in this Bill.

3. Right to safe & effective care

- The delivery of safe and effective care must be a priority for all healthcare providers, whether working within the public or private sectors. To make an informed decision, patients need to feel confident that healthcare professionals are fit to practise and this can only come from statutory regulation.
- Clear guidance on referrals is needed to ensure that patients are referred to the right care at the right time. Currently, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (England and Wales) is developing a draft guideline on chronic low back pain. One of the recommendations, based on efficacy and cost-effectiveness, is the provision of manual therapy, including osteopathy, of up to 9 sessions over 12 weeks⁴. The development of similar guidelines by the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network would in our view significantly benefit patients with musculoskeletal problems in Scotland.

4. Right to clear, accessible & appropriate communication

- Healthcare information for patients and the public must be objective, accurate, up-to-date and available in a variety of formats.
- With the aim of enhanced patient care, communication between patients, GPs and other healthcare professionals providing care, within both the private and public sectors, must be improved. The General Osteopathic Council is keen to raise awareness of the regulated status of the osteopathic profession amongst all healthcare providers in Scotland in order to facilitate a higher level of patient choice and access to care.

⁴ Low back pain: the acute management of patients with chronic (longer than 6 weeks) non-specific low back pain. National Collaborating Centre for Primary Care, September 2008.

5. Right to information about the services I use & treatment & care options available to me

- Healthcare information for patients and the public must be objective, accurate, up-to-date and available in a variety of formats. This should also include the risks & benefits of treatment based on available evidence.
- The General Osteopathic Council would welcome the opportunity to have input into the information to be provided by the proposed National Health Information & Support Service.

6. Right to be involved in making decisions about my care & the services I use

- In order to deliver patient-centred care, healthcare must be a partnership between the healthcare professionals and patients.
- The General Osteopathic Council is embarking on a programme of research to gain a more detailed understanding of public and patient expectations and experience of osteopathic care across the whole of the UK. Reliable and up-to-date data on patients' expectations will assist the GOsC not only in the discharge of its statutory duties, but will inform policy-making and help to shape information provided to patients by all concerned with osteopathic care. One possible outcome of the use of such data would be the issuing of timely, targeted guidance to the profession on practice issues.
- Patient feedback can only help to enhance healthcare in Scotland.
- The idea of providing every household with an annual "Ownership Report" on the local NHS is an admirable one, but it might be more advisable to consider making this report available on request to interested parties, to ensure effective use of resources.

7. Right to privacy & confidentiality

- The General Osteopathic Council supports a patient's right to privacy and confidentiality and this is reflected in the mandatory practice standards applied to all osteopaths.

8. Right to comment about my care & have my concerns addressed

- Patient feedback can only help to enhance healthcare in Scotland.
- The idea of "Patients' rights officers" seems worthy, but it is not clear how these would link to the current Independent Advice & Support service? Care should be taken that the number of contacts points / support for patients is not confusing.
- If osteopathy were to become available on the NHS in Scotland, there would need to be a closer dialogue between NHS providers, support services and the General Osteopathic Council to ensure clear guidance for patients on methods of redress available.