

# Osteopathy: ASA review and guidance for marketing claims for pregnant women, children and babies

November 2016



## 1. Background

Osteopaths are trained in therapeutic approaches that are suitable for a broad range of individuals, including pregnant women, children and babies. Osteopathic care is delivered through a range of interventions which may include onward referral, health management advice, manual therapy, exercise therapy and others. Osteopaths adapt their therapeutic approach depending on the individual needs of the patient and their presenting complaint. Manual therapy techniques employed may include articulation and manipulation of joints and soft tissues.

## 2. Key principles

This document is intended to provide some general key principles and guidance on marketing osteopathy, although the acceptability of a particular advertising claim in context can only be determined by an ASA investigation. When considering whether claims in marketing for osteopathy, including for treatment of pregnant women, children and babies are misleading, the ASA will have regard to both the actual claim being made and the context of that claim<sup>1</sup>. However, we consider that if marketers have regard to the key principles and guidance outlined here, they are unlikely to breach the CAP Code<sup>2</sup>.

### Principle 1: Marketing claims

Claims made on osteopaths' websites that serve the purpose of encouraging consumers to make a transactional decision (i.e. claims that directly or indirectly invite individuals to consider seeking osteopathic treatment for themselves or someone else) must comply with the Code.

### Principle 2: References to treating medical conditions

As healthcare practitioners regulated by statute, osteopaths may offer advice on, diagnosis of and treatment for conditions for which medical supervision should be sought. Those claims should be limited, however, to those for which the ASA or CAP has seen evidence for the efficacy of osteopathy for the particular condition claimed, or for which the advertiser holds suitable substantiation (references to conditions which the ASA or CAP accept osteopathy can help with should be understood on this basis, the ASA acknowledges that new evidence may emerge).<sup>3</sup> The ASA retains the right to ask to review evidence for the purposes of resolving complaints should it consider the need to do so. Osteopaths should therefore ensure that they have access to substantiation before making such claims, including implied claims to treat a particular condition.

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<sup>1</sup> Consumer understanding of claims can be influenced by the context in which they are presented and therefore marketers should be aware that claims listed as acceptable might be rendered unacceptable if coupled with text or images that imply something beyond that for which evidence has been reviewed.

<sup>2</sup> The UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing (CAP Code)

<sup>3</sup> [CAP AdviceOnline article on Osteopathy](#)

### Principle 3: Substantiation for treatment claims

Where the efficacy of osteopathy for treating a particular condition has already been established, treatment claims that do not stray beyond the principles set out in the [CAP advice](#) will be considered compliant with the Code.

### Principle 4: Osteopathy for general and specific patient populations

Osteopaths may make claims to treat general as well as specific patient populations, including pregnant women, children and babies, provided they are qualified to do so. Osteopaths **may not** claim to treat conditions or symptoms presented as specific to these groups (e.g. colic, growing pains, morning sickness) unless the ASA or CAP has seen evidence for the efficacy of osteopathy for the particular condition claimed, or for which the advertiser holds suitable substantiation. Osteopaths may refer to the provision of general health advice to specific patient populations, providing they do not make implied and unsubstantiated treatment claims for conditions.

## 3. Current evidence base for osteopathic treatment for pregnant women, children and babies

There is currently a limited or negative evidence base relating to the use of manual therapies, including osteopathic techniques, for *conditions* specific to pregnant women, children and babies. In the course of this process to date, we have not been provided with any full studies that address the use of manual therapies, including osteopathic techniques, with these groups, and we therefore have not considered new evidence when drafting the guidance.

The current evidence base means that claims to treat symptoms and conditions that are likely to be understood to be specific to pregnant women, children or babies (e.g. colic, growing pains, morning sickness) are unsubstantiated and therefore not acceptable in marketing at the present time. Where an adequate evidence base *has* been established for the efficacy of osteopathy to treat particular conditions in the general population, claims that do not depart materially from those already deemed acceptable by CAP and which describe interventions consistent with osteopathic practice standards are likely to be compliant with the Code.

## 4. Guidance on advertising claims

### References to medical conditions in general and specific patient populations:

- The ASA endorses the current CAP position that osteopathy may claim to help the conditions listed in the CAP AdviceOnline article. As outlined in more detail below, the ASA also considers it is likely to be acceptable to reference these conditions in relation to specific patient populations, such as babies or pregnant women
- The ASA retains the right to request to view evidence for the purposes of resolving complaints should it see the need to do so. Osteopaths should therefore ensure they have access to documentary evidence before making such claims.

### Training and qualifications, including in relation to children:

Claims in this area are **unlikely** to mislead if:

- They give details of the qualifications of osteopaths, including their training in relation to specific patient populations such as children or babies
- They explain the status of osteopaths as statutorily regulated health professionals

Example claims which are likely to be acceptable:

- *Osteopaths are statutorily regulated primary healthcare professionals, who work in the private healthcare and/or primary, secondary and tertiary care in NHS settings*
- *Undergraduate training for osteopaths includes paediatrics*
- *Osteopaths are qualified to work with babies and children*
- *Many osteopaths hold specialists post-graduate qualifications in paediatric osteopathy*
- *Osteopaths sometimes work with local health visitors and midwives*
- *Osteopaths are trained to screen for medical conditions and will tell you if you need to see another health professional such as your doctor or midwife*

Claims in this area are **likely** to mislead if:

- They make explicit or implied treatment claims for specific conditions or symptoms which go beyond those which the ASA/CAP accept osteopathy can help with,

Example claims which are unlikely to be acceptable:

- *Osteopaths often work with lactation consultations where babies are having difficulty feeding*
- *Osteopaths are qualified to advise and treat patients across the full breadth of primary care practice*

## Descriptions of the patient population:

Claims in this area are **unlikely** to mislead if:

- They focus on the patient population, such as their age or any specific needs they might have
- Explicit or implied treatment claims (including through symptoms referred to) are restricted to those which the ASA/CAP accepts osteopathy can help with

Example claims which are likely to be acceptable:

- *Osteopaths treat people of all ages*
- *Osteopathic patients range from children to older people to pregnant women*
- *Osteopaths sometimes work alongside lactation consultants to give postural advice related to breastfeeding*
- *Some osteopathic practitioners work with patients with specific needs, such as those with disabilities, learning difficulties or in NHS premature baby units or paediatric clinics*

Claims in this area are **likely** to mislead if:

- References to explicit or implied medical conditions (including through symptoms referred to) go beyond those which the ASA/CAP accept osteopathy can help with
- References to symptoms imply they can be treated by osteopathy

Example claims which are unlikely to be acceptable:

- *Osteopaths often work with crying, unsettled babies<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Implies colic, which is not supported by evidence.

## Information about health conditions in pregnant women, children and babies:

Claims in this area are **unlikely** to mislead if:

- They give general information about how women's bodies might change during pregnancy, in relation to conditions which the ASA/CAP accept osteopathy can help with
- They refer to the safe and gentle nature of techniques used on babies or other specific patient groups
- They refer to the relaxation or increase in wellbeing that patients might benefit from

Example claims which are likely to be acceptable:

- *A woman's body changes during pregnancy. Those changes include the softening of ligaments, weight increase and changes to posture. That can lead to additional pressure on joints in various parts of the body, including the spine or pelvis*
- *Babies' skeletons are softer than an adult's and osteopaths will therefore use gentler techniques such as cranial osteopathy when treating babies*

Claims in this area are **likely** to mislead if:

- They imply that the birth process is inherently traumatic for babies
- They exaggerate the seriousness of plagiocephaly and brachycephaly (flat head syndrome) or imply it can be treated by osteopathy
- References to explicit or implied medical conditions (including symptoms) go beyond those which the ASA/CAP accept osteopathy can help with – this is likely to include general references even if they don't specifically claim osteopathy can help. References to such conditions might be acceptable in some contexts if they are made in relation to other assistance osteopathy can provide, such as relaxation or calming

Example claims which are unlikely to be acceptable:

- *Birth is a stressful process for babies*
- *Babies' skulls are susceptible to strain or moulding, leading to asymmetrical or flattened head shapes. This usually resolves quickly but can sometimes be retained. Osteopathy can help*

## Treatment claims for pregnant women, babies and children:

Claims in this area are **unlikely** to mislead if:

- They refer to pregnant women, children and babies as representing particular subsections of the general population
- They do not single out people in these patient groups as presenting with problems that are discrete and different from those encountered in the general population
- They do not refer to the presentations or symptoms treated by osteopaths in these groups as a specific condition that can be alleviated (e.g. colic, birth trauma, growing pains)
- They restrict the scope of claims for osteopathic treatment to conditional expressions of the ways in which osteopathy might help
- References to explicit or implied medical conditions are restricted to those for which the ASA/CAP accepts osteopathy can help
- The above would also apply to any client testimonials used in marketing

Example claims which are **likely** to be acceptable:

- *Osteopathy is a gentle treatment suitable for children and babies*
- *Gentle manipulation could help soothe and relax your baby*
- *Osteopathy may help relieve the stresses and strains on your body during pregnancy and after birth*
- *Pregnancy can cause general aches and pains including joint and back pain and osteopathy could help*
- *Osteopathic techniques are suitable for children at all stages of development; I will assess your child to see what might help*

Claims in this area are **likely** to mislead if:

- They refer to osteopathic treatment of pregnant women, children and babies as discrete and different from treatment of the general population<sup>5</sup>
- They imply that the birth process is inherently traumatic and therefore results in damage that requires treatment;<sup>6</sup>
- They suggest that general muscular aches and pains in these groups are attributable to a specific condition (e.g. colic, birth trauma, growing pains)<sup>7</sup>
- They suggests that symptoms or conditions which are specific to these groups (e.g. nausea or heartburn in pregnancy; excessive crying in babies) might be relieved by osteopathy<sup>8</sup>
- References to explicit or implied medical conditions (or symptoms) go beyond those which the ASA/CAP accept osteopathy can help with

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<sup>5</sup> Such claims would require robust substantiation

<sup>6</sup> This could invite people to seek unnecessary clinical intervention

<sup>7</sup> While these are descriptive terms, they would nevertheless invoke a requirement for substantiation.

<sup>8</sup> We understand no evidence exists at present.

Example claims which are unlikely to be acceptable:

- *If your baby suffers from excessive crying, sometimes known as colic, osteopathy might help*
- *Children often complain of growing pains in their muscles and joints; your osteopath can treat these pains*
- *Osteopathy can help your baby recover from the trauma of birth; I will gently massage your baby's skull*
- *Midwives often recommend an osteopathic check-up for babies after birth*
- *Osteopathy can help with breast soreness or mastitis after birth*
- *If your baby is having difficulty breastfeeding, osteopathy might be able to help*
- *Many pregnant women experience pain in the pelvic girdle area. Osteopaths offer safe, gentle manipulation and stretches*
- *Many pregnant women find osteopathy relieves common symptoms such as nausea and heartburn*
- *Use of osteopathy can limit perineum or pelvic floor trauma*
- *If your baby suffers from constipation then osteopathy could help*
- *Osteopathy can also play an important preventative role in the care of a baby, child or teenager and bring the body back to a state of balance in health*

## Descriptions of a consultation and treatment aims and techniques:

Claims in this area are **unlikely** to mislead if:

- The claims focus on the consultation process and what patients can expect
- The claims detail the various techniques osteopaths might use including manipulation, stretching and soft tissue manipulation and cranial techniques, health information, self-management advice and exercise advice/techniques
- Claims relate to the safety of the techniques used
- Claims refer to the care and attention which the patient will receive, including taking their medical history, symptoms and other life events
- References to explicit or implied medical conditions are restricted to those which the ASA/CAP accepts osteopathy can help with
- They explain the theory behind osteopathy and the principles it is based on (provided they do not make efficacy claims beyond those accepted by the ASA/CAP)

Example claims which are likely to be acceptable:

- *Osteopaths utilise a range of techniques including physical manipulation, stretching and massage, and other gentle techniques such as cranial. These are all taught at undergraduate level*
- *Cranial techniques are safe, gentle, and non-manipulative. They are often used when treating young children and newborn infants*
- *Osteopaths work under the principle that there may be a number of contributing factors to the symptoms and will therefore evaluate not only the area which is producing the symptoms, but also associated areas that may be contributing to the issue, including past trauma, environmental factors and the family's health history.*
- *Your osteopath may recommend cranial techniques, which are subtle and gentle*
- *Osteopathy is based on the principle that the structure and function of the body are intimately related. If the structure is not balanced and healthy then the function is affected.*
- *Osteopaths believe that the healthy balance and function of the musculoskeletal framework of the body is essential to whole body health*
- *Injuries such as a sprained ankle can lead the whole body to compensate for a limp. Stiffness or restricted mobility in the pelvis, spine, rib cage, shoulders and neck can make it difficult to compensate for the limp and aching or pain may result*
- *Osteopathic practice is a healthcare approach that provides a package of care that can include one or more of the following: manual therapy, health information, selfmanagement advice and support, and/or exercise therapy, as determined by the individual needs of the patient.*

Claims in this area are **likely** to mislead if:

- References to explicit or implied medical conditions go beyond those which the ASA/CAP accept osteopathy can help with
- References to what will be assessed during a consultation imply that symptoms or conditions which go beyond those which the ASA/CAP accept osteopathy can help with can be treated
- They include unsubstantiated claims about how the therapy works

Example claims which are unlikely to be acceptable:

- *In assessing a newborn baby, an osteopath checks for asymmetry or tension in the pelvis, spine and head, and ensures that a good breathing pattern has been established*
- *Cranial osteopathy releases stresses and strains in the skull and throughout the body*
- *Osteopaths can feel involuntary motion and mechanisms within the body*
- *Cranial osteopathy aims to reduce restrictions in movement*

**The ASA recognises that osteopaths provide a service to a wide range of patients and we have no desire to stand in the way of the marketing of osteopathy services, providing that advertising is responsible and, in particular, that claims about the efficacy of treatment options can be backed up by robust evidence in all cases.**

## Contact us

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