



## **PREPRINT (ACCEPTED) MANUSCRIPT**

### **COMMENTARY**

#### **“Somebody Who Does Something Other Than Osteopathy”**

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Despite the longstanding presence of osteopathic physicians in the medical community, an apparent misunderstanding regarding osteopathic medicine among pundits and press has recently manifested. Specifically, when President Donald Trump was diagnosed with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), on October 2, 2020, the Physician to the President, Dr. Sean Conley, DO, was subsequently catapulted to the forefront of national headlines. On October 3rd, 2020, MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell questioned Dr. Conley's competency via Twitter on the grounds that he "is not actually an MD."<sup>1</sup> Days later, on October 5th, MSNBC's Rachel Maddow questioned the President's medical oversight by virtue of Dr. Conley being an "osteopath,"<sup>2</sup> suggesting that oversight should instead be conducted by "at least an internist" or "somebody who does something other than 'osteopathy.'"<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, there is no question in the United States medical community today: osteopathic physicians (DOs) and allopathic physicians (MDs) are equivalently competent and equally qualified to practice medicine and surgery.<sup>3</sup> Although osteopathic and allopathic education differ in their distant histories, both were subject to the same refinement and incorporation of strong biomedical foundations in the early 1900s following recommendations from the Flexner Report.<sup>4</sup> Osteopathic medicine continually accrued credibility over the remainder of the 20th century as its physicians became active members in the American Osteopathic Association (AOA) and the American Medical Association (AMA),<sup>5</sup> and achieved major milestones in medicine. For example, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Ronald Ray Blanck, DO, served as the 39th Surgeon General of the US,<sup>6</sup> winning the Dr. Nathan Davis Award from the AMA, and is an expert in the medical community response to bioterrorism; likewise, Barbara Ross-Lee, DO, became the first African American woman to serve as the Dean of a US medical school.<sup>7</sup>

Collaboration of osteopathic and allopathic physicians has long been the norm. Osteopathic physicians have had the option to matriculate into allopathic residencies for decades but doing so previously required osteopathic applicants to pass the allopathic licensure exam, the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). More recently, the AMA unanimously voted to recognize the Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination of the United States (COMLEX-USA) as equivalent to the USMLE for the purposes of all applications to US residency programs as of 2018.<sup>8</sup> Further, the AOA and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education agreed to a single accreditation system that came into effect on July 1st, 2020, thus allowing allopathic physicians to apply to osteopathic residencies for the first time in history.<sup>9</sup>

The misunderstandings verbalized on national media, whether malicious or negligent, present a unique opportunity for the osteopathic community to further engage with the public and to work toward permanently dispelling the irresponsible dissemination of misinformation regarding osteopathic medicine. Following Ms Maddow's comments, a large spike in US Google searches for the term "osteopathic medicine" was observed (**Figure**), which may suggest increased public awareness.<sup>10</sup> Visitation to the American Osteopathic Association's website also increased thereafter.<sup>11</sup> This surge in interest stemming from Ms Maddow's comments, and possibly other misinformation, may lead to lasting negative impressions if not properly addressed; many osteopathic organizations, including the AOA,<sup>11</sup> have undertaken efforts to mitigate such impressions by actively seeking media corrections of misinformation and misperceptions. Encouragingly, some media outlets, like the *Los Angeles Times*<sup>12</sup> among others,<sup>13-17</sup> published new articles accurately outlining the equivalent qualifications of DOs, while other media outlets, like *The Washington Post*,<sup>18</sup> corrected previous reporting on the subject.<sup>19</sup>

As osteopathic medical students in the modern age, we, alongside a quarter of US medical students,<sup>20</sup> are obligated to address discrepancies in information regarding our education, our qualifications, and our practice of medicine – and to call for others to do so alongside us. It is particularly disheartening to see our passion and profession misrepresented and distorted on the world stage, but we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge the incredible support our community has received on Twitter and other social media outlets, notably from our allopathic colleagues. Supportive statements

from both osteopathic and allopathic individuals and organizations posted using the AOA's Quorum #GetItRight hashtag campaign<sup>21</sup> were flooding social media within hours of Ms Maddow's misguided statements.<sup>22</sup> We are encouraged that our allopathic colleagues have spoken out on our behalf. This is not an *allopathic* problem nor an *osteopathic* problem; it is a *medicine* problem—for which education is the solution. It is for the sake of the student, the physician, and the patient that osteopathic medicine be acknowledged for what it truly is: holistic, pragmatic, and necessary.

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### Author Contributions

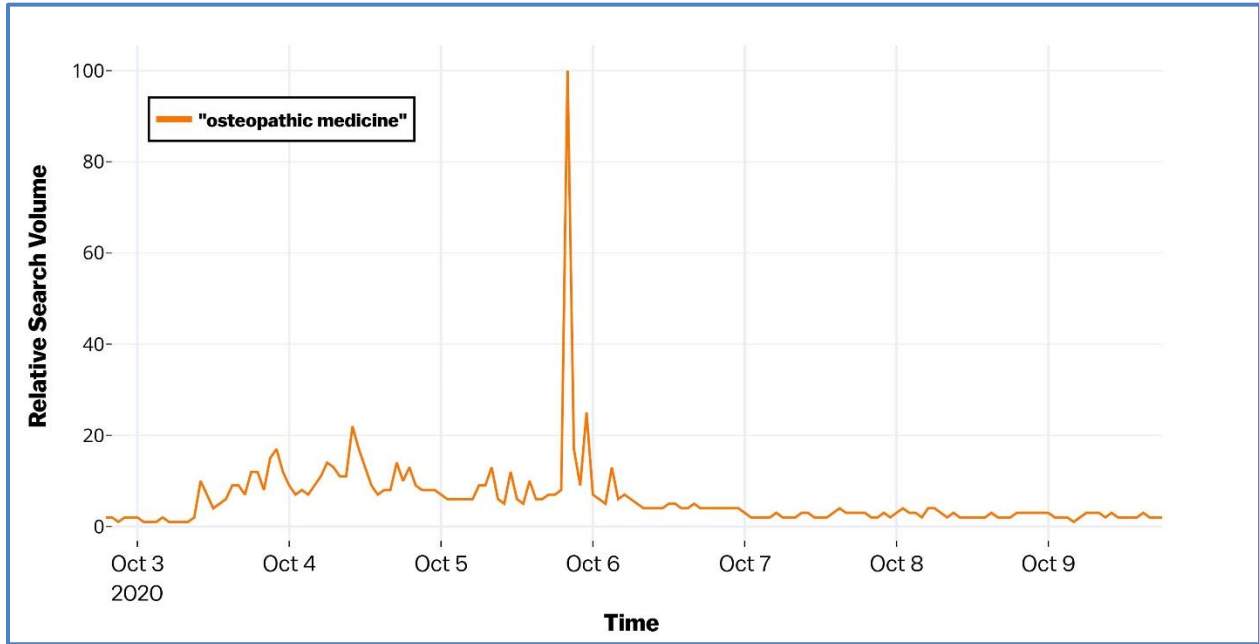
Both authors provided substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; both authors drafted the article or revised it critically for important intellectual content; both authors gave final approval of the version of the article to be published; and both authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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**Figure.** Relative search volume for the search term “osteopathic medicine” in the United States for October 2, 2020 through October 9, 2020. Data were collected on October 9, 2020 for all categories of the search term “osteopathic medicine.” Google Trends assigns a relative search volume ranging from 0-100 to its search terms, representing the proportion of searches for that term compared to the total number of searches for that term across specific times and regions. A value of 100 signifies peak popularity.



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