The University of Brighton has been at the heart of a new approach to gathering clinical and practice data, using it to inform policy and planning for some leading organisations including the General Osteopathic Council, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) and Physio First, the private practitioner organisation in the UK. This is changing the way that physiotherapists and osteopaths manage their professional practice. Innovative methods of collecting data are being used as part of a global initiative to inform and revise professional standards and to identify priorities for new research areas.

"There is a clear recognition that we need a much stronger and broader evidence base, and the best way to achieve that is to achieve consensus on research priorities," said Professor Ann Moore from the School of Health Sciences. "In general practice, patients present with a problem, they're examined and diagnosed, and then, most commonly, a drug is prescribed. As musculoskeletal physiotherapists we tend to use hands-on treatments and also patient tailored exercise, give advice and promote self-management. Therefore, because of multi-modal approaches, our evidence base is quite complex in its development and is used very differently."

Research priority development activity has been carried out using a questionnaire-based Delphi technique involving experts from 22 organisations around the world who are members of the International Federation of Orthopaedic Manipulative Physical Therapists. Using an iterative approach, the group set out to identify a set of research priorities for musculoskeletal physiotherapists around the world and followed on with a second research project to develop priorities for the UK physiotherapy profession, this time involving experts across the 46 speciality areas within physiotherapy.

This approach is already making a difference: for example, in South Africa three universities are using the research priority lists with 56 masters students and one PhD student who are writing dissertations focused on the research priority areas. The data on physiotherapists has helped identify 121 research priorities for the physiotherapy profession. This led to changes in the focus of research funding applied by the CSP, its charitable trust and has also informed how the CSP is working collaboratively with external research charities and patient organisations, such as the Stroke Association and Arthritis Research UK.

In physiotherapy and manipulative therapies, the approach is multi-modal, combining examination, assessment and diagnosis with advice on exercise, posture and patient self-management to reduce the risks of a recurrence of the condition. "The patient education is a key part of what we do, so part of our evidence base focuses on the intellectual interplay with a patient during the treatment session," said Professor Moore.

"We are continually assessing the patient’s capacity for and inclination towards self-management, and this understanding is critical in providing the right treatment. Some patients are highly motivated towards self-management, whereas others want to be provided with a ‘cure.’ Like me, most researchers are established academics, but we also recognised that our graduate students could contribute very effectively to the research programme while they were working on their dissertations," said Professor Moore. Therefore, a set of uniform research priorities are of high importance and relevance.

Evidence-based practice is a way of bridging the gap between research and practice. Evidence-based practice models originally emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, many of the Allied Health Professions are working on developing their own evidence bases, and University of Brighton academics, in collaboration with the National Council for Osteopathic Research, are leading a global effort by the physiotherapy and osteopathy professions to align research priorities and make rapid progress on identifying and implementing best practice.

The physiotherapy, osteopathy and chiropractic professions are delivering a complex set of therapies so their evidence base is correspondingly complex. "We need a better understanding of a wide range of treatments, of self-management and of patient education, so our evidence base is highly diverse and it varies in quality," said Professor Moore. "That’s why setting clear research priorities has been such a critical task: we’re now making strong progress towards a comprehensive evidence base."

This is the first extensive collection of data using a Standardised Data Collection tool from physiotherapists in private practice in the United Kingdom and indeed globally and sets out a model of good practice for private practitioners internationally.

Physio First report on the Data Collection Project