



Purpose

Increase funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for osteopathic research by Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (COMs) to support critical research that will enhance health, lengthen life and reduce illness and disability.

Background

Osteopathic medicine plays a vital role in the nation's healthcare system and is the fastest growing medical field according to the U.S. Bureau of Health Professions. Osteopathic medical schools **educate nearly 34,000 physicians —25% of all US medical students—at 60 teaching locations.**

Congress included language in the FY 2022 omnibus appropriations bill acknowledging that increased access to research funding for the osteopathic profession will significantly bolster NIH's capacity to support robust recovery from the COVID- 19 pandemic, address health disparities in rural and medically-underserved populations and advance research in primary care, prevention and treatment. Congress directed the NIH to report on the status of funding to COMs and representation on advisory councils and study sections.

COMs receive only 0.1% of NIH grants, compared to 40% for allopathic (MD) institutions. There are **no Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine (DOs) among the 3233 study section reviewers** (compared to 493 MDs), and **only one DO among the 462 National Advisory Council members** (compared to 213 MDs).

This historic **funding disparity and underrepresentation** weakens osteopathic medical research in core clinical areas and **disadvantages osteopathic medical students** for the best residencies because of the lack of access to research opportunities.

Impact

Congressional engagement is needed to encourage the NIH to:

- Establish a structured partnership with the osteopathic medical education community to create and execute a plan to increase NIH funding for COMs
- Create a program to incentivize principal investigators from COMs
- Consider opportunities to fund research projects that incorporate the osteopathic philosophy and osteopathic manipulative medicine
- Increase representation from the osteopathic profession on NIH National Advisory Councils and among study selection reviewers

AACOM Recommends

Members of Congress sign on to the congressional letter led by Senator Martin Heinrich, Senator Roger Wicker and Representative Susie Lee to NIH Acting Director Lawrence Tabak in support of osteopathic research and representation. Sign on to the letter [here](#).

About AACOM

The American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM) leads and advocates for the full continuum of osteopathic medical education to improve the health of the public. Founded in 1898 to support and assist the nation's osteopathic medical schools, AACOM represents all 38 colleges of osteopathic medicine—educating nearly 34,000 future physicians, 25 percent of all US medical students—at 60 teaching locations in 34 US states, as well as osteopathic graduate medical education professionals and trainees at US medical centers, hospitals, clinics and health systems. **For more information, please contact David Bergman, Vice President of Government Relations, dbergman@aacom.org (301) 968-4174.**

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Lawrence A. Tabak, D.D.S., Ph.D.
Acting Director
National Institutes of Health
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Dear Dr. Tabak,

Thank you for your commitment to improving the health of the American people through medical research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). As members of Congress, we know that Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (COMs) are integral to our nation's supply of physicians and our research capacity.

In the Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L 117-103), Congress acknowledged that increased funding for research within osteopathic medicine would significantly boost NIH's capacity to support our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased NIH capacity within osteopathic medicine would help to address health disparities in rural and medically underserved populations and advance research in primary care, prevention, and treatment. We write to request that the NIH prioritize funding opportunities for research in osteopathic medicine.

We are concerned by the historic disparity in NIH funding and representation for COMs. Osteopathic medicine is the fastest growing medical field in the country, according to the U.S. Bureau of Health Professions. Additionally, the 38 COMs nationwide currently educate nearly 34,000 physicians – 25 percent of all U.S. medical students. Nonetheless, osteopathic medical schools are underfunded by NIH, receiving only 0.1 percent of NIH grants compared to 40 percent for allopathic schools. Furthermore, there are no doctors of osteopathic medicine (DOs) among the 3,233 study section reviewers at the NIH and only one DO among the 462 National Advisory Council members. If these disparities in funding and representation continue, NIH will miss key opportunities to address some of the nation's most pressing health threats.

COMs are committed to serving rural and underserved communities. Fifty-eight percent of DOs are located in Health Professional Shortage Areas, and nearly 40 percent of physicians who practice in medically underserved areas are DOs. These doctors serve as the backbone of the primary care system, with more than half of them practicing in primary care specialties. COMs routinely train osteopathic medical students in community-based settings, in alignment with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Initiative to Strengthen Primary Health Care.

Osteopathic physicians offer a unique voice and perspective in the medical community. DOs have expertise in the musculoskeletal system and receive additional training in osteopathic manipulative treatment (OMT), a hands-on technique and non-pharmacological solution to pain management. NIH is strongly encouraged to increase research into this treatment as a non-addictive alternative to opioids.

As NIH seeks to address the disparities identified by Congress and expand research funding and representation for COMs, we urge NIH to take the following additional steps:

1. Establish a structured partnership with the osteopathic medical education community, including the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM), that creates and executes a plan to increase NIH funding for COMs.
2. Establish a program to incentivize principal investigators from COMs.
3. Consider opportunities to fund research projects that incorporate the osteopathic philosophy and OMT.
4. Increase representation for the osteopathic profession on NIH National Advisory Councils and study selection reviewers.

We encourage you and NIH leadership to meet with relevant stakeholders to discuss the issues outlined in this letter. We thank you for your attention to this important matter and look forward to learning more about your efforts to advance funding and representation opportunities for osteopathic medicine.