Degenerative Cervical Myelopathy (DCM) is a disabling condition estimated to affect up to 2% of adults. It arises when arthritic and/or congenital changes in the cervical spine compress and injure the spinal cord, causing a range of symptoms, including pain, motor, sensory and autonomic deficits to upper and lower extremities, neck and torso. Treatment today is largely limited to surgical decompression. While this will offer most meaningful benefit, few make a full recovery, contributing to among the worst quality of life scores of chronic disease, and high levels of dependence and unemployment. Consequently, despite progress, further advances that improve outcomes are urgently required.

Multi-stakeholder processes that prioritize research questions are a method of accelerating progress, by focusing activity and investment on key questions. Fundamental to their success is the selection of the questions; the key uncertainties that if answered, will increase our knowledge and have the potential to change care. Such prioritization requires close engagement with front-line users; both professionals working with the disease, but also individuals living with it.

Named after Dr. James Lind, reportedly the first clinician to undertake a randomized controlled trial, the James Lind Alliance (JLA) initiative was founded to support just this; research prioritization by front-line professionals and those with “lived experience.” Since its inception in 2004, the JLA has refined its methodology and directly supported over 100 processes.

In this Global Spine Journal Special Edition, we share our JLA Priority Setting Partnership for DCM, conducted as part of the AO Spine RECODE-DCM (aospine.org/recode) initiative, to increase efficiency and accelerate advances in DCM research. This extraordinary process, involving 429 individuals from 68 different countries was led by the AO Spine Knowledge Forum Spinal Cord Injury, a focused group of international spinal cord injury experts acting on behalf of AO Spine. It has captured perspectives from 17 different healthcare professions, but also people with lived experience through our partnership with Myelopathy.org (DCM Charity). A total of 3404 research ideas were submitted, distilled into 74 unanswered summary questions and prioritized by consensus, across stakeholder groups into a Top 10 (Table 1).

These priorities extend beyond current research activity, highlighting early-diagnosis, rehabilitation, long-term care, pre-clinical science, health economics, awareness and education. In particular, prioritization of education and awareness, represent the clear value for involving people living with the condition: (1) These emerged as their number 1 priority but were only ranked 25th by other healthcare professionals and 45th by surgeons initially. (2) A research question on education and awareness has never previously been a research priority in DCM, which arguably has been driven by the surgical community to date.

Identifying the top research priorities was one challenge, but ensuring they are disseminated and answered is the challenge to come. With this special edition, we aim to communicate the top research priorities that are based on robust methodology.
and involved a diverse community that delivered them. We also seek to contextualize their individual significance and potential research directions in dedicated narrative reviews. We hope this edition can inspire current and future researchers, and provide a basis for funders to develop a better understanding and more focused investment in DCM. We also hope that the clarity of the research priorities will enable funders to increase overall investment into this field. This is required to advance knowledge and address the large unmet clinical needs of people with DCM.

We thank all those that have contributed to AO Spine RECODE-DCM and the identification of the top research priorities. We now call upon the global research community to acknowledge these by directing their attention and resources to addressing them, embracing the notion that by focusing on the issues that are most compelling, the community can accelerate progress toward improving outcomes for this major (yet under-appreciated) health problem.

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