

Position Statement: Professional identity, individual responsibility and public accountability through the use of title in occupational therapy (2013)



Each occupational therapist needs to consider the importance of retaining professional title, in order to honour his/her occupational therapy education and celebrate the unique contribution that occupational therapists can bring through the promotion of health, well-being and justice through occupation for all people.

In considering the importance of the use and retention of professional title, the Occupational Therapy Professional Alliance of Canada (PAC), the Canadian Occupational Therapy Foundation (COTF), the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy University Programs (ACOTUP), the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) and the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations (ACOTRO) acknowledge that:

- Education as an occupational therapist provides opportunity to practice in a broad range of roles¹ and settings with individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations and populations to enable engagement in occupations of life.
- Retention of the occupational therapist title throughout the career span, regardless of practice setting, job title or nature of practice, is a professional privilege and responsibility to promote recognition and accountability of the work of occupational therapists.

Recommendations for occupational therapists

1. Occupational therapists acquire and maintain their professional title.
2. Occupational therapists embrace a broad, inclusive understanding of occupational therapy practice.
3. Occupational therapists clearly understand how to represent themselves.
4. Occupational therapists actively proclaim and celebrate their professional identity.

Background

1. The authority for practice by professions such as occupational therapy is based on the social contract that outlines privileges and responsibilities as well as mecha-

nisms for public accountability. Cruess & Cruess (2008) explicate the expectations and obligations the social contract details for the medical profession. Occupational therapists can extrapolate from these messages: individuals educated as occupational therapists are granted “autonomy in practice, ... the privilege of self-regulation, and both financial and non-financial rewards. In return, [occupational therapists] are expected to put the [client’s] interest above their own, assure competence through self-regulation, demonstrate morality and integrity, address issues of societal concern, and be devoted to the public good” (p. 580).

2. Becoming an occupational therapist, involves extensive study of theory and practice, development of clinical skills and participation in fieldwork. Currently, in Canada occupational therapy educational programs offer a professional Master’s degree in occupational therapy as the entry-level credential.
3. Occupational therapists may follow their personal and professional interests and work in broad and diverse practice areas. Occupational therapists may serve clients who may be individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations or populations (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). We acknowledge that occupational therapy is a profession, focused on enabling the health and well-being of clients through occupation; this extends to providing services to our clients in diverse environments within and beyond health services. The healthcare environment in its many forms is only one arena in which one finds occupational therapists; increasingly occupational therapists are practising within social services, workplaces, communities, justice, the military, among others. As well, there is a long history of occupational therapists working in the public education system.
4. There is also a recognition that all professions are comprised of individuals who are ‘facilitators’ within the profession (Houle, 1980), (for example, occupational therapists whose practice includes the provision of

¹ The *Profile of Occupational Therapy Practice in Canada* (CAOT, 2007) identifies the seven main roles of occupational therapists as: 1. Expert in enabling occupation; 2. Communicator; 3. Collaborator; 4. Practice manager; 5. Change agent; 6. Scholarly practitioner; 7. Professional

services such as education, research, regulation, policy development, professional leadership). These positions offer important contributions in the development and advancement of the profession. Individuals holding these positions should continue to utilize the professional designation of “Occupational Therapist” along with their job title such as professor, researcher, manager, or policy maker.

5. A title serves as a means of representing oneself to others. Titles may be attributed to an individual through a variety of mechanisms; some earned through training or education (e.g., professional academic credentials), achieved through registration (e.g. professional designation) and others as a result of a position held (e.g. a job title such as case manager). Recent trends toward interprofessional approaches to service delivery have contributed to the use of a large variety of job titles, often shared by individuals from different professions and sometimes specific to the organization. Job titles do not replace, nor do they preclude the use of a professional designation. What remains important is the concept of clear and appropriate representation. The therapist should consider the audience and determine the most appropriate means of portraying their role (College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario, 2001).
6. In order to work as an occupational therapist in Canada individuals must register with the regulatory organization in the province in which he / she will practise. The mandate of these organizations is to protect and serve the public interest. One means by which regulatory organizations realize this mandate is by setting standards for registration, thus ensuring that only qualified occupational therapists are delivering services. In Canada only individuals who are registered with a government legislated regulatory organization may use the title “Occupational Therapist” (except in the three Territories). In the context of professional regulation, the title communicates information to the public regarding the professional’s knowledge, expertise, and commitment to standards. Title protection as part of the regulation of a profession is one mechanism used to help the public readily identify those individuals who, through their registration with the regulatory organization, are accountable for the delivery of occupational therapy services that meet the established standards of the profession.
7. It is a privilege to hold the title and with this privilege comes responsibilities. These responsibilities include upholding standards and behaviours becoming of a professional. Occupational therapists must also be precise and transparent in representing themselves and their work. Holding of title affirms one’s commitment to the

profession, and acknowledges the benefits the profession serves to everyone. There are “both written and unwritten portions entailing moral commitments that are fundamental to both the social contract and professionalism . . . one cannot legislate altruism, commitment, or independent professional judgment; they must come from within individual [occupational therapists]” (as cited in Cruess & Cruess, p. 583).

8. A leadership forum involving stakeholders from the following organizations was held in the spring of 2010: Occupational Therapy Professional Alliance of Canada (PAC), the Canadian Occupational Therapy Foundation (COTF), the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy University Programs (ACOTUP), the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) and the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations (ACOTRO). The concerns identified regarding use of title included general confusion on the issue, the impact on professional identity, attrition of experienced members of the profession, loss of potential occupational therapy leaders, wasted economic and social resources for educating people that leave the profession, reduced opportunity to use occupational therapy concepts and principles to influence the health and well-being of the population, and decline in the voice and numbers of our small profession. This document is one outcome of that forum where commitments were made to: further investigate the area of retention of title and attrition from the profession; generate strategies to remedy identified challenges related to this matter; and create a preliminary joint position statement addressing the issue.

Conclusion

This document entitled *Position Statement – Professional identity, individual responsibility and public accountability through the use of title in occupational therapy* has been prepared with the input of the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations (ACOTRO), the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy University Programs (ACOTUP), the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT), the Canadian Occupational Therapy Foundation (COTF) and the Occupational Therapy Professional Alliance of Canada (PAC). The participation of these groups represents a desire to reach a broad common understanding on this topic and to catalyze initiatives that will lead to action and facilitate change to ensure individuals can honour his/her occupational therapy education and celebrate the unique contribution that occupational therapists can bring through the promotion of health, well-being and justice through occupation for all people.

Definitions

Clients: In occupational therapy clients may be individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, or populations who participate in occupational therapy services by direct referral or contract, or by other service and funding arrangements with a team, group, or agency that includes occupational therapy (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007).

Occupational therapist: From a broad perspective, an occupational therapist is an individual who is educated in occupational science and the practice of occupational therapy. From a legal perspective, it is defined in Canadian provincial statutes as a person who is registered to practice occupational therapy.

Occupational therapy: Is the art and science of enabling engagement in everyday living, through occupation; of enabling people to perform the occupations that foster health and well-being; and of enabling a just and inclusive society so that all people may participate to their potential in the daily occupations of life (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007).

Occupational therapy entry-level education: Occupational therapists are university educated health professionals. As of 2008, national accreditation is granted only to Canadian occupational therapy education programs that grant a professional occupational therapy degree at a Masters level. The legislation and regulations that govern the practice of occupational therapy in each jurisdiction will set forward the education requirements that must be met by Canadian educated and internationally educated occupational therapists.

Occupational therapy practice: Occupational therapists use a systematic approach based on evidence and professional reasoning to enable individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, or populations to develop

the means and opportunities to identify and engage in the occupations of life. This collaborative process involves assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring, modifying and evaluating the client in relation to occupational engagement in self-care, work, study, volunteerism and leisure. Occupational therapists use key enablement skills such as adaptation, advocacy, coaching, collaboration, consultation, coordination, designing/building, educating, engaging and specializing to enable occupation. Occupational therapists may assume different positions such as advising on health risks in the workplace, safe driving for older adults, or programs to promote mental health for youth. Occupational therapists also perform functions as managers, researchers, program developers, educators, and practice scholars in addition to the direct delivery of professional services to clients.

Social contract: A basis for legitimating legal and political power in the idea of a contract, the rights and duties of the state and its citizen ... are reciprocal and the recognition of this reciprocity constitutes a relationship which by analogy can be called a social contract (adapted from Cruess & Cruess, 2008).

References

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- Townsend, E. & Polatajko, H. (2007). *Enabling Occupation II: Advancing an Occupational Therapy Vision for Advancing Health, Well-Being and Justice through Occupation*. Ottawa, ON: CAOT Publications ACE.

Position statements are on social and health issues relating to the profession of occupational therapy. They are frequently time-limited and persons wishing to use them more than two years after publication should confirm their current status by contacting the CAOT Director of Professional Practice by e-mail: practice@caot.ca.