

SERVING SOCIETY'S NEEDS: THE PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS

RESPONDIENDO A LAS NECESIDADES DE LA SOCIEDAD: LA RESPONSABILIDAD PROFESIONAL DE LOS TERAPEUTAS OCUPACIONALES.

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Prologue

I am honored to be asked to write the prologue for your new journal. We are a community of clinicians, educators and scientists and because of technology we have become an international community. We all are linked by our core values. We believe that engagement in occupation provides opportunities for individuals to influence their well-being by gaining fulfillment in living ; through the experience of occupation (or doing), the individual is able to achieve mastery and competence by learning skills and strategies necessary for coping with problems and adapting to limitations; opportunities for exerting self-determination should be reflected in our intervention strategies and that we employ a collaborative process where the patient's values are respected and their goals become central to the plan of care.

SUMMARY

Occupational therapists are being called on to serve the needs of society, Our role, in addition to being a clinician, an educator or a scientist is to assume a leadership role to make our contributions visible. In addition to serving in more traditional roles, this article talks about the expanding roles of the occupational therapist as the needs of people change.

RESUMEN

Los Terapeutas Ocupacionales están llamados a servir/responder a las necesidades de la sociedad. Nuestro rol/papel, además de ser un clínico/sanitario, un educador o un científico es asumir/adoptar el rol de dirección/liderazgo para hacer visibles nuestras contribuciones. Además de servir en muchos papeles tradicionales, este artículo habla sobre la expansión de los roles/competencias del terapeuta ocupacional como del cambio de necesidades en la gente.

The profession is at a very important point in time as our contribution to health is being recognized as an important and necessary service to society. We now can benefit from the experience of colleagues from around the world as we implement services that improve the lives of people with disabilities and chronic health conditions. This new journal will bring the ideas of international colleagues to the therapists of Spain; I hope the occupational therapists of Spain will share their experiences and their science with others.

Because what we do is so important as we help people whose lives are challenged with health and disabling conditions.

It is important for physicians, the public and policy makers to recognize our contributions. Few of us aspire to public recognition; we entered this profession because we wanted to make a difference in people's lives. However, there are many ways that we can make our work more visible. Society is facing a large population of elderly who want to remain independent as they age, there are more and more children with special needs, many workers who have been injured and even more older workers who want to stay active and productive. There are more and more people with disabilities and many individuals with persistent mental illness, all who want quality in their lives and the opportunity to participate in their families, communities, and society. We each have the knowledge and skills to make a difference in their lives.

We need to feel empowered to use our knowledge as professionals. We are not in jobs. We are bringing our knowledge and our skills and our capabilities to a job to improve the lives of the people we serve. If we think of ourselves as professionals, people will treat us as professionals. Successful professions plan

wisely and determine their own destinies. As we in occupational therapy design our future it is important for us to clearly understand what services will be most needed, and how we can best provide them to the individuals and populations who can most benefit from them. In focusing our attention on service to others, we define ourselves as a professional and secure the trust of the public upon whose support our future is dependent.

Those who founded our profession were connected by a belief in the power of human occupation to influence health. It is critical that each one of us in the profession today embrace and act on that same belief, since it is the value we place on doing that defines us as a unique profession, Occupational therapy alone connects the increasingly technological world of health care and the personal, meaning-infused world of the patient (Englehardt). We do not do things to people, "we give people opportunities" (Meyer), opportunities to help themselves, to manage health conditions and disabilities so that they can do the things that are important and meaningful for them.

There are people ranging from physicians to architects and city planners that can benefit from our expertise, and we can benefit from theirs. While Occupational therapy is an autonomous profession, we must recognize that we will flourish only in collaboration with others, as collaborators benefit from and rely on the collective experiences of the client, the family and others who seek to remove the barriers that limit the individual's performance and participation. There are things we can do to place occupational therapy in the public eye, to deserve and receive payment for our services, and to contribute our knowledge to benefit individuals, organizations and communities. We are going to continue to work in hospitals but the goal will be to triage people with chronic health and disabling conditions to the services they need; in rehabilitation hospitals we work to foster recovery and participation and transition people back to communities, to work and to family life; in outpatient facilities we also to work with persons who have hand and other physical injuries to help them return to

work, family and community life; in skilled nursing facilities the goal is to maximize function and create opportunities for meaning; in schools it is our responsibility to help children develop the capacity to fully engage in the learning environment and gain the skills to transition to adult life; and in communities to enable those with mental illness to acquire the skills to manage the complexities of their daily lives. We need to maintain and enhance traditional practice arenas however there are many things we can contribute because the health care system and society is changing. We must be responsive to new challenges and opportunities. If we rely only on practice in traditional arenas we will miss major opportunities for which our traditions, our knowledge base and our unique expertise and clinical reasoning seem especially well suited.

The following societal needs require the services of the occupational therapist. As the number of adults over 65 double in the years ahead, few will view nursing homes as their ideal living situation. Because we recognize the importance of personal places and the memories of meaningful experiences imbued there, we can use our expertise in activity, performance and environment to help people remain independent in their own homes and communities. We can use our expertise to help forge new long term care policies that promote health and well-being. Safe transportation is critical for those who live in suburban and rural areas. Knowing who can safely remain on the roads is important to individuals, to families and to society; and enabling clients to pursue transportation alternatives is second nature to our way of practice. Families are being called on to provide care for their older loved ones, occupational therapists should be a major resource to families as most of the care for older adults is provided by the family. The literature in this area is very clear, those providing care experience less stress in that role when they have successful interactions with the ones for whom they are caring. Those successful experiences come when the caregiver understands their loved ones condition and has the skills to help them do what they need to do. This

represents another intervention ideally suited to those with occupational therapy expertise.

Children and youth with disabilities need the services of an occupational therapist to achieve the capacity to be successful in school, to be engaged with families and communities and transition into adult roles with the skills for employment. There are also many opportunities to help workers prevent unnecessary disabilities, returning to work after accidents, and have work and work stations that enable success in the world of work. It is also important to help older workers retain their ability to engage in productive work and be active in their families and communities. Occupational therapists are also playing important roles helping those with persistent mental health issues to gain the skills to live in the least restrictive environment, to engage in meaningful occupations and avoid social isolation. A new area for occupational therapists is to foster health and wellness. Occupational therapists can employ self management skills routinely in our interventions, to help people make life style choices that tap their potential and manage their health and disabling conditions to avoid secondary health problems and achieve their goals. I am sure each of you can think of other opportunities for occupational therapists to enable the performance of the clients you do, or could serve. All of these problems are ones that are of concern to families, policy makers and when our services address them, we are visible.

Charles Christinsen, a former vice president of the American Occupational Therapy Association said "We need to wield more influence in places where decisions are being made. We need to work harder at developing leaders to go into local communities, to know how to network, to know how to go to opinion leaders or be opinion leaders, and have influence over decisions that affect everyday lives and occupational needs of human beings." We must prepare our students for leadership roles. Those in education, practice and research must see leadership as central to their roles as educators, as practitioners or

scientists. Leadership is the interaction of knowledge and skills with courage, commitment, confidence, and determination to make changes to delivery systems, payment policies, public policies, and they are essential to ensure the people we serve have access to OT services.

We are smart, talented people who have a passion to improve the lives of those we serve, we can provide leadership to our institutions, our communities and to society. The work we do is so important.

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