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<p>Occupational Therapy New Zealand Whakaora Ngangahau Aotearoa (OTNZ-WNA)</p> <p>Role of Community OT working in Physical Health</p>	 <p>OTNZ - WNA Occupational Therapy New Zealand Whakaora Ngangahau Aotearoa</p>
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Background

This position statement has been developed in consultation with occupational therapists working in the physical health sector and it reflects their current thinking. While occupational therapists working in the mental health sector may also choose to accurately refer to themselves as community occupational therapists, for the purposes of this position statement the terms community occupational therapist and community occupational therapy refer to the physical health sector.

It aims to communicate with key stakeholders (consumers, purchasers and other professions / agencies), the philosophy, key tasks, practice strengths, research needs, specialist roles and key issues for these community occupational therapists.

Changes in health service delivery have seen an increase in the demand on community occupational therapists. Changes in society including the work environment, reimbursement structures and an increasing number of clients choosing to remain in their homes rather than supervised or supported living situations, all affect how the community occupational therapist performs the job. Additionally implementation of legislation and national health contracts allows funders (e.g. Accessable and Enable NZ) to take a greater role in directing what outcomes and services are provided by the community occupational therapist.

Chisholm, Dolhi & Schrieber (2000) highlight that these influences have compelled many occupational therapists to divert their practice away from the foundational concepts of occupational therapy. This abandonment of core philosophy, skills and competencies has often resulted in the substitution of occupational based treatment with rote interventions. These changes lead to numerous practical, ethical, social and political dilemmas and require a re-evaluation of the key tasks and skills of a community occupational therapist.

Philosophy of Community Occupational Therapy

OTNZ-WNA believes that all communities are entitled to access the skills and knowledge of community occupational therapists.

OTNZ-WNA believes the core philosophy of community occupational therapy is that services are delivered within the daily context of the individual's life roles and responsibilities including self-care, work and leisure. The community occupational therapist works in the environment of the client's choice. This may be the individual's home, residential facility, or other community setting e.g. school or work place etc. Community occupational therapists work in partnership with clients from all age groups, ethnic backgrounds, geographical

Areas and socio-economic levels. The community occupational therapist has skill in assessment and implementation of therapy where occupational dysfunction is identified.

While community occupational therapists may be based in departments with other therapists, their day to day service delivery is largely autonomous. This requires a level of skill in independent assessment and decision making.

OTNZ-WNA recognises that there may be different demands and expertise required for community occupational therapists working in rural and urban settings.

OTNZ-WNA acknowledges the relevant legal, ethical, professional standards and current practice considerations that inform the practice of occupational therapists working in community settings, in particular the Treaty of Waitangi.

Key Tasks

OTNZ-WNA believes that the key tasks of occupational therapists working in community settings should focus on occupation and encompass but not be limited to the following key tasks.

- Assessment of occupational need. Assessment identifies the focus of occupational therapy input and may also contribute to the wider diagnostic process.
- Intervention using occupation as a basis to enable people to achieve their optimal level of performance.
- Linking people with relevant community resources that enhance their environment and occupational functioning including facilitating access to resources such as Enable Funding / Accessable and ACC. Assisting clients to negotiate services and to use them to enhance occupational functioning. This is likely to include accreditation in assessment and prescription of specific equipment and housing alterations.
- Developing and maintaining links with family/whanau/fono. Including educating the client / family / caregiver to enhance, maintain or promote occupational performance

- Maintaining professional documentation that meets local documentation standards and communicates the client's occupational performance.

Core Skills

Hagedorn (2001) describes Core; simply indicates that the skill or competency is one of the essential elements of professional practice, the use of which remains relatively constant, although adapted by the selection of therapeutic models or frames of references. Skill: is a practiced action, which may be employed in various situations in different combinations.

OTNZ-WNA believes that the core skills of occupational therapists working in community settings are as follows;

- Using the occupational therapy process to conduct functional assessments and apply treatments that will enable individuals to function at their maximum level of occupational performance
- Understanding occupation, its influence on performance and the importance of purposeful occupation
- Using conscious use of self with knowledge of occupational dysfunction to develop a therapeutic relationship and treatment outcomes
- Being solution orientated, i.e. using unique skills such as activity analysis and adaptation to promote independence or engagement in occupation
- Collaborating with the client, family, health care professionals or others throughout evaluation and intervention. The community occupational therapist uses methods of communication that match the abilities and therapeutic needs of consumers and others
- Using critical and ethical reasoning to guide practice and resolve practice dilemmas
- Using appropriate language to justify actual or potential outcomes to funders.

Practice Strengths

The community occupational therapist has a critical and essential role to play in facilitating the functional occupational performance of individuals, who continue to live in the environment of their choice

OTNZ-WNA believes that community occupational therapists have strengths in the following areas of practice;

- The ability to appropriately choose from a range of therapeutic approaches. Underlying the core skills of the community occupational therapist is the utilisation of a model / approach that keeps the occupational therapy process alive. Hagedorn (2001) describes process-driven practice having application in the community where

occupational therapists need to retain the option of using a number of approaches, depending on the nature of the problem which you and the client identify as being significant. The occupational therapy process is then used with the client to name the problem and decide how best to frame it. The community occupational therapist then selects which of the available approaches to use as a tool and generates solutions or plans actions within that approach.

- Competence in clinical reasoning. Hagedorn (2001) highlights that the process-driven approach has flexibility, but demands a highly versatile and competent therapist who is confident in clinical reasoning.
- Competence in the integration of new knowledge thereby continuously developing and improving practice. Youngstrom (1998) describes competence as evolving over time through repeated experiences. It occurs as new knowledge and skills are layered over past experiences, integrated with them and applied in practice. It is not a standard that is achieved and then forgotten. Competence requires self-evaluation, learning, feedback, and revalidation to ensure its maintenance and development. Acceptance of the role as a community occupational therapist requires evaluation of skills and competencies, whether entering the role as a new graduate or as an experienced practitioner.

Research

OTNZ-WNA believes there is a clear need for occupational therapists to conduct research of their practice in the community setting. OTNZ-WNA believes the focus of this research should be:

- Validating the effectiveness of occupational therapy practice in the community settings including outcomes for clients and outcomes for purchasers
- Examining the impact that the numerous demands of the changing health environment has on the ability of community occupational therapists to maintain core occupational therapy philosophy and skills at the forefront of their practice.

Specialist Role

OTNZ-WNA recognises the specialist role of the community occupational therapist. It is recommended that a new graduate should have had a student placement in the area of community occupational therapy and a one year placement in general inpatient experience, although two years' experience is desirable.

OTNZ-WNA supports the development of a competency framework for specialist assessors administering the Enable Funding and Accessable processes and the principles of the accredited assessor's scheme. OTNZ-WNA recommends that community therapists become accredited in their areas of knowledge and expertise, but the development of a competency framework must involve input from occupational therapists in the field.

OTNZ-WNA recommends that senior occupational therapists perform the role of Professional Standards Monitor relative to their areas of knowledge and expertise.

A comprehensive and structures orientation programme is vital and it is recommended that clinical supervision should be provided by an occupational therapist with at least 3 years' experience in the area of community occupational therapy. Clear and regular access to the occupational therapy and multidisciplinary team to facilitate increased clinical safety is vital.

Membership of OTNZ-WNA is important especially in areas of professional isolation. As individuals, community occupational therapists have a responsibility to stay current in practice through ongoing continuing education.

Protection of Professional Indemnity

OTNZ-WNA believes that occupational therapists employed in community settings should maintain the role title occupational therapist. This is to clearly identify the professional role with an emphasis on occupation.

Position statements are statements on political, ethical, social, cultural and practice issues that influence client well-being, the role and practice of occupational therapy or that affect Occupational Therapy New Zealand Whakaora Ngangahau Aotearoa. They are frequently time limited and persons wishing to use the more than two years publication should confirm their current status with the Executive Director of OTNZ-WNA.

References

Chisholm D, Dolhi C, Schreiber J. 2000. *Creating Occupation Based Opportunities in a Medical Model Clinical Practice Setting*. *OT Practice*, 5 (1): CE- 1-8, Jan 3.

Hagedorn R. 2001. *Foundations for Practice in Occupational Therapy*. Third Edition. Churchill Livingstone.

Youngstrom MJ. 1998. Evolving Competence in the Practitioner Role. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 52 (9): 716-120.

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