

POSITION STATEMENT

ETHICS, SUSTAINABILITY AND GLOBAL EXPERIENCES

Introductory statement of the purpose of the paper

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) acknowledges that the world of international training and work experiences is complicated. It is becoming a leading topic of interest in many health professions and professional educational programs, including occupational therapy programs. From this, several issues and concerns have emerged around the ethics and sustainability of international work or training experiences. Occupational therapists need to work with communities in a collaborative manner and strive to meet their needs while still considering the existing infrastructure and the sustainability of the interventions upon leaving the country¹. This paper aims to address these issues whilst upholding the present values and beliefs of the profession and the WFOT. Establishing and building reciprocity and partnerships between host and visiting partners is essential in empowering this movement.

Statement of the position being taken

The WFOT has a responsibility to establish a clear profile of what constitutes ethical international work and training experiences and how they fit with the philosophy, mission and foundational values of the profession. Occupational therapists need to consider concepts such as sustainability, respect and cultural sensitivity. These considerations will allow for the below goals to be accomplished in efforts to foster reciprocity between international partners:

1. To reduce any vestige of colonialism or paternalism, and in turn foster a reciprocal partnership
2. To remove any objectives or goals that speak of a self-serving approach
3. To ensure that once the immediate players are gone the project goal identified by the hosts has been achieved and/or there is a program in place to sustain the service

Statement of the significance of this position or issue to occupational therapy

International work and training experiences are an important aspect of occupational therapy practice² and should adhere to the fundamental concepts of the profession. Additionally, these experiences should be consistent with client-centred practice as a foundational precept of the profession. They should support and reinforce the notions inherent within community capacity building and living individual lives with purpose and meaning as these constitute the core values of occupational therapy.

Statement of the significance of the position to society as appropriate

Following the Ethics of Care Principle³, the focus should be on the maintenance of an interdependent relationship that is founded on mutual efforts and benefits. Being physically present in the community short term is important, however there is significance in ensuring that there is maintenance of a continuous and ongoing collaborative relationship¹. If these tenets and values are held true, the societies and communities within which these efforts are expended will become enriched, building for a sustainable future.

Substantiating rationale for the position

Establishing global partnerships that focus on ethics and sustainability rather than personal experiences will empower communities and allow for true reciprocity². Adherence to the principles outlined in the paper will ensure that global international work and training experiences embody the fundamental standards of the occupational therapy profession. It will allow for the enrichment of communities and society as a whole in a consistent and sustainable manner. These principles will allow for global occupational therapy practice to be grounded in a more robust ethical framework and ultimately benefit both partners.

Challenges and strategies

There are many phrases used for international work and training experiences that suffer from limited and inconsistent definitions. Such terms include: service learning, volunteerism, international fieldwork and cultural immersion. There are elements of commonality among all of these phrases for gaining global experience and enhanced understanding, however, there is also shared matters for concern that require serious consideration. This educational domain hovers delicately close to an interpretation of colonialism while professing a commitment to the provision of aid and services.

Further challenges will include overcoming personal beliefs of doing good seen only from the giver's perspective. There is a tendency for society to frame global work in models of giving-to rather than investing-in communities. There is a complexity that exists with the power dynamics between partners that often leaves the host country vulnerable to a paternalistic and dependent relationship. A shift towards more equitable models of practice that support peer respect, collaborative relationship and reciprocal relationships needs to be established. Education on ethical considerations, sustainability and community engagement are the responsibility of the occupational therapist.

Conclusion

The WFOT believes it is fundamental that the Member Organisations and occupational therapists work to build partnerships that are collaborative, provide equal opportunities and are sustainable. This will enable the development of networks to evolve which will create a reciprocity that allows occupational therapists to collaborate to identify issues and empower community involvement.

References

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