

Position Statement
GLOBAL HEALTH: INFORMING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTICE

Introductory statement of the purpose of the paper

This paper addresses the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) position on global health and explores the application of this concept and its relevance to the occupational therapy profession.

Statement of the position being taken

Global health is an area for study, research, and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide. Global health emphasizes transnational health issues, determinants, and solutions; involves many disciplines within and beyond the health sciences and promotes inter-disciplinary collaboration; and is a synthesis of population-based prevention with individual-level clinical care. (The Lancet, Vol. 373, June 6, 2009)

Occupational therapists must be proactive in addressing these issues through occupational therapy and its unique skill set based on meaningful occupation as well as through collaboration with other organisations and individuals.

Occupational therapy contributes to the global health of society and individuals by enabling the right to engage in meaningful, purposeful occupations, irrespective of medical diagnosis, social stigma or prejudice. The concept of global health should be central to occupational therapy practice, education and research

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

Global health is a concept that includes many pertinent issues relevant to the occupational therapy profession, including; non-communicable diseases (NCDs), infectious diseases, rehabilitation needs following traumatic life changes, chronic conditions, mental health and enhancing life during old age. Occupational therapy can contribute to global health by enabling more engaged and meaningful lives as defined by those living them.

Statement of the significance of the position to society as appropriate

Global health is an issue that may be known to define this time in history (Foege et al., 2005). Poverty, stigma, prejudice and extremist regimes all contribute to the profound suffering experienced around the world. In order to confront and conquer the current wants and needs of our societies, it is critical that sustainable partnerships are forged to address priority needs over time.

Substantiating rationale for the position

Five particular types of partnerships have been identified (Foege et al, 2005) that are seen to be of central value to the world's ability to address global health issues; they are the partnerships which: i) the WHO develops with other international organisations; ii) span global to local levels involving agencies with both public and private sector donors; iii) the WHO creates with national and local health authorities; iv) involve individuals and local groups in addressing and facing their own health and welfare; and, v) bring together nongovernmental (NGOs) and community organisations that often merges technology, educators, researchers, citizens and policy makers into a rich community that is well skilled and prepared for such challenges. It is in this final, fifth category that occupational therapy fits so well, through local organisation involvement and the non-partisan, global leadership of WFOT.

Challenges and strategies

The challenges faced can be met when viewed from a collective perspective of an organization. Equally important, multiple individual challenges can be identified including: adapting techniques used in other countries to fit different local contexts; thus, overcoming the top-down approach to rehabilitation met in multiple locations. Strategies that will address these areas will include dialogue and research. Strategies for involvement can guide all occupational therapists from local to global levels of influence.

Partnership building: WFOT believes that growth of purpose and outcomes will be escalated and achieved when Member Organisations engage in partnerships with other occupational therapy groups, other disciplines and international organisations. This will enable networks to evolve focused on priority issues with which occupational therapy can be of most value.

In our roles as advocates, we can push boundaries to enable innovative models for free access to health services in areas within which such services are scarce; working with other NGOs and local community capacity builders to ensure clean water, safe housing, education and meaningful community engagement. As occupational therapy becomes more established, recognised and valued within the international community, we can become true partners in world-changing initiatives related to regions dealing with the aftermath of war, social upheaval and revolution.

Dissemination: Many occupational therapists are not aware of the complexity of global health challenges; therefore, information about global health needs and priorities must be made available to occupational therapists worldwide. Conversely, many in the developing world are not or may not be aware of the skill set of occupational therapists and of the impactful inputs they can provide – an example of the loss of valuable partnerships at local and national levels.

Education: Education about global health challenges and the potential occupational therapy role(s) is an area of increasing curricular importance for all occupational therapy education programmes.

Research: Research partnerships are also critical to forge, enabling occupational therapists to be investigators in inter-professional research teams. In addition, independent inquiry that would explore the most effective occupational therapy inputs is an essential element of a professional strategy to address issues of global health.

Conclusion

Through the increase of technology and communication methods, the emergence of a much smaller world has many implications. For the health and well being of the world's population, those implications can offer hope in the shape of multinational involvement of expertise and skill working with local experts and conditions. The current climate facing health professionals is one in which occupational therapy can play a major role through the enablement of and engagement in chosen and necessary occupations, participation in communities and the creation of more meaningful lives. The establishment of networks allows previous experiences and knowledge to be retained and built upon. These networks become repositories of knowledge, skills, applications and achievements.

References

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