

POSITION STATEMENT

PROFESSIONAL REGISTRATION

Introductory statement of the purpose of the paper

This position paper addresses professional regulation or professional registration as it applies to Occupational Therapy. In many countries many health professionals, including occupational therapists, are accountable to a regulatory body (or Board) which is usually mandated through government legislation to “serve and protect the public interest”. These professional regulatory bodies have the delegated authority to govern the professional practice of their members in the public interest. One of their key functions is to ensure that the members of their profession practice competently and ethically. In some countries the professional regulatory bodies also approve the educational programs which health professionals must complete before they can apply to be registered. Frequently, in occupational therapy, it is the title ‘occupational therapist’ that is protected which means that only those individuals who have met the registration criteria and are members in good standing of the regulatory body can call themselves occupational therapists. These criteria may include graduating from an approved/accredited educational program, successfully completing a registration examination or other criteria as established by the regulatory body and the government. It is that body that keeps a ‘register’ of health professionals that meet the competency standards for their training, professional skills, behaviour and health practice.

Statement of the position being taken

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) promotes occupational therapy as an art and science internationally and supports the development, use and practice of occupational therapy world-wide, demonstrating its relevance and contribution to society. The WFOT therefore recognises and supports the protection of the public from incompetent, unethical practice of occupational therapists. It recognises that statutory regulation boards (either internal to or external from the professional organisation) established in collaboration with governments to formally regulate the activities of its members, play an essential role in protecting the public and affording clients the confidence that registered and/or licensed occupational therapists are competent and qualified to do the jobs that they do.

Substantiating rationale for the position

Professional registration, by regulatory bodies, protect the public by providing for the registration of health practitioners as well as a common system of investigation into the professional conduct, professional performance and ability to practice of registered health professionals. Professional registration also minimises the risk to the consumer and protects the public by providing for ongoing assessment of practice competency and the registration of students of health professions. In the event of poor performance or unprofessional conduct, the registration boards have the responsibility for establishing competency standards, monitoring practice, investigating therapist practice, imposing sanctions and assisting occupational therapists to retrain or address any difficulties affecting their ability to practice.

Challenges

1. The composition of the 'Board' must comprise a majority of occupational therapists who are knowledgeable about the practice of occupational therapy in the country/state.
2. The 'Board' must be at 'arms length' from the professional occupational therapy organisation of the country and from the government agency that created it.
3. The 'Board' must have at least one member of the 'public' who represents the clients who have received services from an occupational therapist.
4. All members of the occupational therapy profession, who are practicing occupational therapy or who hold themselves out to be occupational therapist, must be registered with the 'Board', having satisfied the criteria for registration, in order to practice.
5. There must be adequate financial resources to implement a regulatory model, to create competency standards and rules that will be required for the regulatory process to be implemented.

Strategies

1. Both the 'Board' and the professional organisation should collaborate in order to ensure that occupational therapy practice is competent and ethical.
2. The WFOT, the 'Board' and the professional organisation of the member country may represent the profession to the government and thus have a greater voice.
3. The name 'occupational therapist' will be protected so that only those who have met the established criteria (e.g. graduation from a WFOT approved educational program, or graduation from a nationally accredited program, maintenance of professional competency) can use the name and/or practice occupational therapy.
4. Specific acts within the practice of occupational therapy may be protected so that only those who have met the established criteria will be able to undertake those acts.
5. There will be clarity in defining what constitutes malpractice, and the sanctions for malpractice will be clearly defined and published.
6. All occupational therapists who are registered with the 'Board' will have fair legal representation in regard to complaints related to their competent and ethical practice of occupational therapy.

Statement of the significance of issue to occupational therapy

Professional regulation or professional registration, no matter its structure, affords the occupational therapy profession greater authority, control, and professional prestige. The regulatory 'Board' has the obligation to set entry-requirements to practice the profession and competency standards for continuing practice of the profession. It provides the profession with a means of representation and access to the government which allows it to express its point of view. Regulation sends a message to society about the confidence they can have in the expertise and professionalism of occupational therapy and provides members of the profession an opportunity to gain control of the future of the profession through direct input into the Standards that are used to evaluate their practice.

Statement of the significance of the position to society

Professional regulation or registration minimises risk to the consumer, protects the public from harm of the unethical or incompetent occupational therapists. As the 'Board's' authority is delegated by the government, it is accountable to the government and thus to the citizens of the state for their protection against potential harm done by an occupational therapist.

Conclusion

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists endorses professional regulation and registration of occupational therapists where the regulatory body is at arm's length from the government and is charged with establishing entry-to- practice criteria for members and determining standards competent and ethical practice and the sanctions (disciplinary actions) for its members who do not meet the standards. In some jurisdictions the sanctions (disciplinary) function may be the legal responsibility of another external authority.

References

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