

October is National Occupational Therapy (OT) month. It is a time to celebrate occupational therapy's contributions to helping people live healthier, more satisfying lives. The month is a joint public awareness initiative of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT), its members and its affiliate provincial and territorial occupational therapy associations. These associations hold various events across the country to increase the understanding of the important role occupational therapy plays in creating inclusive, diverse communities.

As I reflect on my own practice, I am struck by how grateful I am to have discovered such a fulfilling career. Although my path to it was somewhat indirect (I originally wanted to be a special education teacher) I have appreciated the incredible opportunities and experiences this career choice has offered me. I have been able to work all over the world, in hospital, private practice and community settings, with individuals having mental health issues and physical disabilities. I have had the privilege to work with and learn from the most incredible and resourceful people as they deal and cope with a disability or health issue.

WHAT IS Occupational Therapy?

OTs define occupation as everything that a person does each day, within each of the following categories:

- self-care (getting dressed, bathing, cooking and eating);
- leisure (hobbies, sports, social activities);
- productivity (paid or unpaid work, housework and school).

An OT may assist a client to:

- learn new ways of doing things; for example, dress or cook with one arm after a stroke;
- adapt materials or equipment they use; for example, build up pencils and special seating for a child to attend school;
- make changes to their environment; for example, negotiate with an employer for a gradual return-to-work plan following a motor vehicle accident.

Canadian occupational therapists are known worldwide for their client-centred approach. OTs value the knowledge, experience and self-determination of the client in the practice of occupational therapy.

NSTU's Early Intervention Program (EIP), part of the Member Assistance Program (MAP), is an occupational therapy-based program to support NSTU members who are experiencing illness or injury. This program can be accessed by any NSTU member, at work or on sick leave, on a self-referral basis. This means that members ultimately make the choice about their involvement and are actively involved in the decisions about interventions.

Benefits of OT

Anyone, of any age, can benefit from occupational therapy if they are unable to, or find it difficult to participate in a desired activity. Occupational therapists have training and knowledge in physical and psychosocial development and disorders and therefore look at the whole person, not just the physical aspects of their problem. They also look at these problems or risks in terms of how they affect the client's function. By seeing an occupational therapist, people develop the skills for the job of living. OTs enable clients to participate more fully in the life they choose, or to prevent a disruption in their day-to-day living. Occupational therapy benefits the individual and those around them such as teachers, employers, parents, spouses and other family members.

Occupational therapy can help clients overcome and/or develop strategies to cope with:

- mobility and seating problems due to developmental disorders, arthritis, a spinal cord injury or simply the aging process;
- managing pain due to an automobile accident, burns, incorrect lifting, arthritis, fibromyalgia, or repetitive strain injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome;
- fatigue related to a heart condition, multiple sclerosis, depression, stress, or stroke;
- returning to work after an injury or prolonged illness;
- relearning and finding new ways to manage home-making activities after a brain injury or acute mental illness;
- discovering memory aids and other tricks for people who experience poor memory due to aging, Alzheimer's Disease, or stress.

Occupational therapy can also help prevent:

- unnecessary hospital stays or premature nursing home admissions;
- work injuries due to poor work station positioning, unrealistic pace or work, and other organizational and psychosocial strains;
- school dropouts due to poor attention spans, or reading and writing difficulties;
- unemployment among people with a developmental disability or mental illness.

The occupational therapists who work in the NSTU's Early Intervention Program have enabled members to stay at work, minimize sick time, make a successful return to work, obtain necessary adaptive equipment and learn new strategies to improve their day-to-day function at work and at home. Our EIP satisfaction surveys tell us that teachers are more comfortable at work, have less pain, are more productive, benefit from the equipment provided and report more balanced home and work lives.

Required Education

Qualified occupational therapists have:

- graduated from an accredited university program with a four-year baccalaureate degree or a master's degree in occupational therapy;
- successfully completed a minimum of 1,000 hours of fieldwork education;
- successfully passed the national certification examination administered by the CAOT, or met provincial registration qualifications.

Their approach is based on research that proves that an individual's ability to engage in occupation increases their health and well being.

OTs in the Early Intervention Program also participate in yearly continuing education courses and in-services on such topics as return to work, mental health issues in the workplace, ergonomics, time management, and achieving healthy lifestyle balance.

Where do OTs Work?

- in the community: home care, schools, health boards, community health centres and mental health teams, clinics, community action groups, workers compensation boards, and government;
- in workplaces and with employee assistance programs;
- in rehabilitation companies and in private practice;
- in institutions: acute care hospitals, long term care hospitals, rehabilitation centres, nursing homes and mental health centres.

In EIP we find ourselves in the classroom, at school board offices, in homes, at the NSTU offices, and in our cars as we travel across the province.

Who Pays for OT Services?

Your NSTU dues cover you for the services of an OT by a referral to the EIP. Members enrolled in the NSTU medical plan with Medavie/Blue Cross also have coverage for private OT services.

Occupational therapy services covered under provincial medical plans are found in hospitals or government-funded rehabilitation centres and home care programs. Occupational therapists in private practice may be covered by some auto insurance plans, Workers' Compensation, long-term disability insurance plans, Veterans Affairs Canada and extended healthcare insurance plans.

Current Trends Affecting OT

Changing health and social needs of Canadians and health care delivery systems have influenced occupational therapy practice. Some of these trends include:

- an aging population;
- increased awareness of the needs of persons with disabilities;
- higher survival rates from accidents and injuries;
- increased emphasis on health promotion and prevention to keep health care costs down;
- higher incidence of mental health and family problems;
- changes in work conditions such as job stress and early retirement;
- a more informed public regarding health and health concerns.

Certainly within the EIP we have seen an increase in referrals as teachers deal with greater job demands and a higher incidence of job stress. We have also found that teachers are more informed about such areas as ergonomics and life balance and are seeking assistance to incorporate strategies into their daily lives both at work and home.

I invite you to celebrate this great profession and all the diverse contributions we make. Throughout the month of October, you will see OTs in the malls, in the newspapers, and in the public vicinity doing what we do best—"providing the skills for the job of living."

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For more information about Occupational Therapy, helpful tips and how to contact an OT in your area contact the NSTU's Early Intervention Program, or visit www.OTWorks.com