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Occupational Therapist and Occupational Therapy Assistant: We are Proud of These Titles

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As the editors of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT), we have high regard for the roles of occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants and appreciate the delineation of these roles and the value of each as described by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT). According to AOTA and WFOT, occupational therapists are autonomous health care professionals who promote participation in daily activities that give value and meaning to life. They are responsible and accountable for all aspects of occupational therapy service delivery, including the safety and effectiveness of their services (AOTA, 2021; WFOT, 2023, para. 3). Occupational therapy assistants are health care professionals with expertise in carrying out and modifying occupational therapy treatment plans and provide “occupational therapy services only under the supervision of and in partnership with the occupational therapist” (AOTA, 2021).

While occupational therapists are responsible for developing and monitoring an effective treatment plan based on the current evidence, occupational therapy assistants have expertise in carrying out and modifying treatment plans, often having more direct contact hours with clients and therefore more closely monitoring and adjusting the treatment plan according to the client’s progress. The occupational therapy assistant also contributes to the documentation of treatment and helps to determine when the client is ready for discharge (CBD College, n.d.).

In recent years, there has been a push to forgo the use of these separate titles and combine them under the title occupational therapy practitioners to indicate both occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants. The main reason I have heard for this push is that occupational therapy assistants feel like the title occupational therapy practitioner is more inclusive.

Lost in Translation

The OJOT editors initially allowed authors to use the titles of their choosing for occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants. Some authors chose to use the title occupational therapy practitioner, and some also abbreviated the title to OTP. We started, however, to receive inquiries, most often from readers in other countries, expressing confusion about the title. Some wondered if it was an advanced degree, such as a nurse practitioner, and others complained that it was confusing.

OJOT is now read in over 200 countries, so I took some time to explore why the title occupational therapy practitioner was being lost in translation. In all the public-facing international resources from Africa, Asia, Australia, Canada, Europe, and South America that were examined, the title occupational therapist was used; however, the title occupational therapy practitioner was not found. There is also a disparity in the use of the title occupational therapy assistant. Only 71 other countries have some type of occupational therapy assistant position. In most of those countries, occupational therapy assistants are non-degreed, and most have different titles, such as occupational therapy support worker in the UK and assistant occupational therapist in France.

Of interest were the more broad, socially conscious descriptions of the work of occupational therapists. For example, in South Africa, they state that “Occupational therapists are committed to advance the right of all people - including people with disabilities - to develop their capacity and power to construct their own destiny through occupation” (OTASA, 2017). And in Latin America, they state that “Occupational therapists, acting in society and meeting its demands, seek to promote inclusion, emancipation, and participation in the socio-communal life of people” (Vinzón et al., 2020, p. 1).

Through this exploration, I realized that in using the title occupational therapy practitioner, we were acting in a manner that is ethnocentric without regard for the translation to the global members of our profession who have broader perspectives that need to be included in our scholarly publications. The

US, along with European countries, has a long history of colonialization in which we think that if we decide on a topic, the rest of the world should acquiesce and conform. The US is only one of 200 countries from which OJOT has readers, authors, editorial reviewers, and scholars. It is with respect for the perspectives of the global members of the occupational therapy profession that we have decided to use the title occupational therapist.

Licensure and Ethical Considerations

In addition to the global impact, there are licensure and ethical considerations. Under state licensure laws, we are licensed as occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants. Occupational therapy practitioner is not a licensed professional title. To legally provide occupational therapy services, occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are required to obtain and maintain a license in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam. In the US, a certified occupational therapy assistant (COTA) does all the duties of an occupational therapy assistant but has taken an extra step to get certified in the profession. Specifically, they have registered with the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) and completed the necessary certification exam.

Ethically, we are obligated to be accurate in the use of our titles. According to our Code of Ethics in the Standards of Conduct section 5: Professional Competence, Education, Supervision, and Training, occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants must “represent credentials, qualifications, education, experience, training, roles, duties, competence, contributions, and findings accurately in all forms of communication” (AOTA, 2020). Combining the titles into one category as practitioners does not accurately represent our credentials. If physicians and physician assistants (PAs) started referring to themselves as medical practitioners, accurate and full disclosure of information to the public would be hidden and perhaps even deceptive. Physicians and PAs may share the same duties and their work may look much the same, but the PA works under the supervision of the physician. It is a symbiotic relationship, much like occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants who work in tandem to provide excellent health care to the individuals we serve.

Much like PAs, occupational therapy assistants do not view the position as a stepping stone to becoming an occupational therapist but rather as a profession with its own status. When authors use the title occupational therapy practitioner, they overlook the distinct roles and the value of each member of the treatment team. In addition, authors may be discussing an area of practice in which only an occupational therapist is licensed to practice, and, therefore, the combined title of occupational therapy practitioner does not adhere to our licensure and ethical obligations to represent our duties accurately.

Inclusive Versus Exclusive

The argument has been made that the title occupational therapy practitioner is more inclusive and for some occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants in some situations, this may be true. For the editors of OJOT, however, this has not been our experience. As mentioned previously, the term is confusing and not inclusive of the perspectives of international occupational therapists. In addition, the term can be interpreted as divisive or exclusive. In the profession of occupational therapy, we have practitioners, academicians, researchers, and administrators. For example, I obtained and have maintained a license to practice occupational therapy in the state of Michigan since licensure laws were passed in 2008, but I have not been a practitioner since I moved back to Michigan in 1996. I am an occupational therapist who is an academic, a researcher, an author, and an editor. I am proud of my role as a professor and mentor, but at this point in my career, I am not a practitioner. I am, however, an occupational therapist.

I have all three of my degrees in occupational therapy, and I am licensed as an occupational therapist. Because there are so many occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants who do so many different roles, using the title occupational therapy practitioner is exclusive, not inclusive.

When we publish the title occupational therapist in OJOT, the intent is not to exclude occupational therapy assistants. Any information published, even when the title occupational therapist is used, is meant to be educational for both occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants. As noted previously, according to AOTA, occupational therapy assistants carry out and modify treatment plans under the supervision of occupational therapists. Therefore, all information pertaining to occupational therapists should be of interest to occupational therapy assistants.

Conclusion

Many of us have spent our entire careers defining and defending the profession of occupational therapy, explaining what we do not only to the person sitting next to us on an airplane but also to the physician from whom we need referrals (Vij, 2023). We have fought for a seat at the table. We have fought to be reimbursed for our services. We have fought to have team members understand that we are not physical therapists for the upper extremity or activity therapists. And we have fought, on occasion, among ourselves about who we are as occupational therapists (Hinojosa, 2003).

Over the years, however, we have made progress. We are educating other professions and the public about who we are as occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants. To improve public awareness, we have sponsored national ads in magazines and newspapers. On occasion, we have had characters in movies accurately depict our practice. And we have developed a better understanding among ourselves of the roles of the occupational therapist and the occupational therapy assistant and how to teach those roles to students. In this issue, Gentile et al. (2023) discuss a collaborative education program for students studying to become occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants that teaches the delineation of roles and responsibilities. Our hope is that through publishing articles such as this, we develop a better understanding of one another and how we function collaboratively to promote the profession of occupational therapy. For the reasons discussed, we will continue to publish articles on this topic, and we will continue to use the titles occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant because we are proud of these titles.

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