Time To Escape the Comfort Zone

Although I have renewed my membership in the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) as a practicing therapist, I am concerned about our profession's future. With the influx of managed care dictating health care delivery, occupational therapy is at a crossroads between stagnation with professional parochialism and growth with the vision of role enhancement. The AOTA has seemingly ignored the trends that are threatening the future of occupational therapy, and most importantly, the patients and clients whom occupational therapists serve.

Firstly, while the representatives of our Association have worked energetically on internal issues affecting the AOTA, such as the disagreements with the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy, they have provided only lip service to congressional and executive leadership at the state and federal level without attacking the systemic issues that are limiting occupational therapy services. For example, the Health Care Finance Administration has minimized the vital roles occupational therapy practitioners perform for patients who receive home health care by not allowing occupational therapy practitioners to provide stand alone services, thus limiting our contribution.

Secondly, the Association appears unable to control the proliferation of occupational therapy education programs around the nation. Although studies have projected an increased need for occupational therapy services until the year 2005, the output of new graduates will surely override the demand. These "career trend" studies appear to ignore the obvious willingness of many health care administrators to forego the expertise of professional level therapists by using less costly aides and assistants to provide therapy services. The motivation of health administrators is profit. Outcome goals will be affected as health care management dictates the level and amount of rehabilitation to each patient or client. As a response, the Association's Commission on Education and Accreditation Committee should implement a certificate of need protocol within the accreditation process as a stop gap measure to counter the over-proliferation of academic institutions interested in starting occupational therapy education programs. The simple matter is "greed." Without clear evidence of the necessity for developing new occupational therapy programs, we will only enrich the academic institutions at the expense of the profession.

Lastly, and probably most controversially, our leadership has done a lot to attract attention to the very positive role of occupational therapy in health care but has done little proactively to ensure the future of our profession through role enhancement and cross training. As demands increase to provide services at a capitated rate, employers will focus on therapists who are willing to cross train and diversify their skills in the health care delivery system. This may mean training in a complementary profession or redefining the occupational therapist's role within a transdisciplinary environment. Although AOTA is against such positions at this time, health care maintenance organizations and hospital administrators are not interested in protecting the autonomy of the occupational therapy profession over the desire of profits.

Perhaps a separate association of occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech-language pathologists who are willing to consider the benefits of cross training to counter the influx of managed care needs to be established. Or, we may need to reestablish a new professional identity that will create a new level of therapists who can specialize in their interest areas and, at the same time, be available to a diverse referral base. As for those who wish to hold out in the vain attempt to keep their "sacred" identity intact, it may be possible but at the peril of their employment.

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Correction


Copyright for Figure 1 on page 384 should be credited to George F. Toth-Fejel, 1998.

The A/OT editorial staff regrets the error and hopes that readers were not inconvenienced.