**Presidential Address**

Your Personal Commitment

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Imagine never having to answer the question, “What is occupational therapy?” Imagine a world in which everyone knows about occupational therapy and values what we do. Since becoming active as a volunteer in the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), I am often asked, “What is AOTA doing about this?” The answer: Plenty. However, AOTA cannot do “this” alone. Promoting occupational therapy takes a partnership—a collaborative and committed effort with you, its members. You are AOTA.

Let’s look at the first part of the equation. What is AOTA doing? AOTA has many accomplishments in the “promoting the profession” arena.

**Media Outreach**

AOTA launched the National Awareness Campaign, a multiphase project to promote occupational therapy in the print media. In Phase 1, advertisements appeared in major print media calculated to reach the “sandwich generation,” such as *People Magazine* and *Good Housekeeping*. In Phase 2, advertisements were carefully placed in *Case Manager*, *McKnight’s Long Term Care Management*, *Risk Management*, *Employee Benefit News*, *Employee Benefits Journal*, and *Professional Safety* to reach health care decision makers.

AOTA moved to the Internet (www.aota.org) to advocate for occupational therapy through a free screensaver that explains proper office ergonomics. AOL, CNN, and Women.com also promoted the free screensaver on their Web sites.

AOTA put special emphasis on reaching out to the business media to promote occupational therapy in the business community. Articles about occupational therapy appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, and

**U.S. News & World Report.**

AOTA has promoted occupational therapy in nonprint media as well. It produced a short television program for “American Medical Review,” hosted by Morley Safer of “60 Minutes.” This video, which will be broadcast on PBS stations across the country, features the role of occupational therapy with persons with low vision.

**Successful Lobbying Efforts**

Thanks to the efforts of AOTA’s Public Policy department and its top-notch lobbyists, AOTA succeeded in getting Congress to pass a 2-year moratorium on the $1,500 cap on Medicare Part B outpatient occupational therapy. AOTA also successfully fought legislative efforts to blend occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech–language pathology into one generic rehabilitation benefit. As a result of AOTA’s lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill, an additional 500 million in Medicare dollars has been allocated for therapy services. Further, AOTA’s efforts increased resource utilization group rates in 15 categories for those practicing in long-term-care settings.

AOTA lobbied heavily for the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (Public Law 106–170). This legislation provides for more money for treatment intervention to assist persons on social security with returning to work, thereby providing occupational therapy practitioners with more job opportunities.

Furthering occupational therapy’s position in Washington, DC, at the invitation of Tipper Gore, AOTA was present at White House ceremonies marking the 1-year anniversary of the White House Conference on Mental Health. Former AOTA President Karen Jacobs, EdD, OTR/L, CPE, FAOTA, was present at the original White House Conference on Mental Health as well.

Outside the Capital Beltway, AOTA has provided lobbying assistance to individual states to protect the profession from scope-of-practice challenges from other professions as well as to promote licensure, such as to California, the last state to acquire licensure or regulation of occupational therapy practice. When Florida occupational therapy practitioners faced the threat of elimination of their state licensure, AOTA provided tools and assistance to help organize the efforts against this move.

Moving along with technology, AOTA has provided many online tools for members. Members can send legisla-
Taking The First Step
AOTA has done a lot, but the Association is only as strong as its membership. That is where you, as members, come in. As Koichi Tsukamoto aptly said, “[O]ne step by 100 persons is better than 100 steps by one person.” (Deep & Sussman, 1993, p. 171). Imagine the power of what we could do if we all took one step.

Make Your Own Commitment to the Profession
What can you do to help our cause? I am asking all occupational therapy practitioners to make an annual personal commitment to our profession. What kind of commitment do I ask of you? You decide. Your commitment can cover a wide scope of needs for the profession and match your talents and interests.

Professional Commitment
This most basic commitment includes joining AOTA and your state association. When our lobbyists go to Capitol Hill, we need power in numbers to support the advocacy work done for us by our professional organizations. Further, we need to commit to encouraging others to make the same commitment to joining our professional organizations.

Financial Commitment
Promoting our profession and assuring our role in the future of health care and community-based or community-built services. Other collaborative efforts resulted in the American Medical Association including in its at-risk driver guidelines specific recommendations that physicians refer patients to occupational therapy for evaluation. Additionally, the American Academy of Neurology recommends occupational therapy practitioners as team leaders in evidence-based, violence-prevention programs.

Further expanding opportunities for occupational therapy practice, AOTA collaborated with the American Optometric Association to change Medicare Part B referral requirements so that optometrists can now refer to occupational therapy for services. Other collaborative efforts resulted in the American Medical Association including in its at-risk driver guidelines specific recommendations that physicians refer patients to occupational therapy for evaluation.

Leadership Commitment
Volunteer yourself and talent to AOTA and your state association. Consider mentoring a future leader as part of your leadership commitment.

Awareness Commitment
Read the newspaper. Look for trends that might affect occupational therapy practice. Anticipate change and embrace it. In 1999, newspapers reported the Supreme Court’s decision in the case of Olmstead v. L.C. (Savage, 1999). In this case, the Supreme Court decided that the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (Public Law 101–336) may require states to provide community-based services rather than institutional placements for persons with disabilities. Imagine the implications this case has on occupational therapy practice as we expand into the community, and you read it first in the newspaper. If you prefer an online source for your news, www.individual.com allows you to personalize by topics the news e-mailed to you daily.

As part of your awareness commitment, you can start or participate in “occupational therapy truth squads.” Have you ever gotten angry because a newscaster called occupational therapy “physical therapy;” because a television program intentionally eliminated occupational therapy from a storyline where it should have been included; because a newspaper article showed an occupational therapy practitioner with a caption calling her a physical therapist; or because a journal article downplayed our role? Truth squad members agree to monitor the media and respond to mischaracterizations of occupational therapy to enlighten the media with the truth. They write letters to the editor and counter articles presenting the occupational therapy perspective.

Time Commitment
Just devoting your time can make a big difference in how people view occupational therapy. Speak at your child’s school about occupational therapy when he or she has opportunities to share different vocations. Make it an annual commitment to speak at a medical, osteopathic, optometric, or a physician’s assistant educational program in your community about occupational therapy. Think of how many more referrals we could get for occupational therapy services if every physician, physician assistant, and optometrist in the United States graduated from school knowing about the benefits of occupational therapy.

Attitude Commitment
Voice your opinions to occupational therapy leaders and legislators. Let them know how you feel and make suggestions instead.
of accepting decisions with which you do not agree. Feel free to e-mail suggestions for me at AOTAPresident@aol.com.

As a resident of Florida, I do not have to tell you that every vote counts. Please vote. If all occupational therapy practitioners vote, we can have an impact for our issues.

Show your attitude about occupational therapy by discouraging those who are merely impersonating occupational therapy practitioners or going through the motions. If you do not believe in cone stacking, stop doing it and encourage your colleagues to stop. Also encourage your colleagues to incorporate occupation into practice. Use a client-centered approach.

Competence Commitment
Stay current in your practice area. Learn about new practice arenas. Become future oriented and get the skills to meet future needs in occupational therapy. For example, cracking the code of the human genome will lead to a radical change in medicine. Five years from now, you might be able to take a blood test that reports your profile of potential future medical conditions. Occupational therapy can be there in the forefront to facilitate lifestyle changes in persons who find themselves with the genetic potential to develop heart conditions and other preventable health conditions. Penny Kyler, MS, OTR/L, has led the way for occupational therapy's role in this area. We need to prepare now for these changes.

Promote competence in others. Stay committed to the basic principles of occupational therapy. Use evidence-based practice to help document our value.

Research Commitment
We need to prove our value through research. We do not need to be expert researchers to help with occupational therapy research. Partner with universities for assistance. Participate in collecting data for others. Develop outcomes-based clinical research that is based on your own clinical intervention.

Become a "Walkin', Talkin', Occupational Therapy Promoter"
Promoting occupational therapy must become second nature to us all. How can you promote occupational therapy? First you must believe in what you do. You must believe in your heart that occupational therapy is valuable so that you can sell it to others.

As the old expression goes, "If you can't say something good, don't say anything at all." We must speak positively about occupational therapy. Many occupational therapy educational programs eliminated their requirements for volunteer work or observation in occupational therapy departments as part of their admissions requirements. Why? In the wake of the Balanced Budget Act Amendments, occupational therapy practitioners were discouraging potential students from going into occupational therapy. Today, admissions are down to professional and technical programs, and we now face a severe shortage of personnel within the next 2 to 3 years. We cannot encourage persons to go into occupational therapy or promote our profession if we are not saying something good about it.

Tell everyone you know and everyone you meet about occupational therapy. Always identify yourself as an occupational therapy practitioner, not an OT. Always mention occupational therapy, spelled out. People may not know what an OT is, and you can educate them about occupational therapy.

Wear an occupational therapy T-shirt. I wear mine whenever I run errands on weekends or travel with my family. People always ask me about occupational therapy or tell me about an experience with their elderly parent and about a wonderful occupational therapist they worked with. If all occupational therapy practitioners, their partners or significant others, parents, and children wore occupational therapy T-shirts on the first weekend of the month, we would have a showing of close to three-quarters of a million people.

Become a key player. Position yourself so that you are included at the table as policymakers. Pursue needed change. Jennie Lou, MD, MS, OTR/L, and Reba Anderson, PhD, OTR/L, faculty members at Nova Southeastern University, noticed that Stedman's Concise Medical Dictionary for the Health Professions did not include a definition of occupational therapy or its related terms of art. Dr. Lou contacted the publisher, and the latest edition now includes a definition of occupational therapy, occupational science, and other related terms.

Speak About Occupational Therapy at Every Opportunity
Learn to speak before others so that you can share occupational therapy with the world. You can acquire speaking skills through Toastmasters, a nonprofit organization that provides its members with tools to speak more effectively. If you do not feel comfortable speaking before groups, find a videotape that conveys your message and answer questions after the viewing.

The idea is to spread the word about occupational therapy by speaking about what you do to any group that will listen. Many organizations look for speakers, such as Rotary clubs (which meet weekly) and other civic groups. We all know occupational therapy's virtues; now let's tell everyone else about them. Speak at non–occupational therapy conferences to spread the word outside our own circles. For example, occupational therapy practitioners should consider presenting or speaking at local and national meetings of attorneys, physicians, optometrists, case managers, risk managers, and insurance adjusters, all of whom may refer to occupational therapy if they were aware of what we do. We need to collaborate with chief executive officers, architects, engineers, safety engineers, teachers, principals, religious groups, support groups, homeless shelter personnel, parent groups, and day-care center owners on community-based or community-built projects. We need to speak before groups of businesspersons such as ski resort owners, riverboat operators, casino operators, restaurant owners, manufacturers, and packing plants about how we can provide consultation services in a variety of areas from ergonomics and injury prevention to accessibility for persons with disabilities to developing adult day-care in the workplace. We even need to speak before groups of plumbers: They can discover firsthand in the home the difficulties people may have in living independently, leading to a referral for occupational therapy services.

Join a community organization, charity group, nonprofit organization, place of worship, or the PTA, and take a leadership role by becoming a board member. Most importantly, let everyone you work with in these groups know you are an occupational therapy practitioner.
Put on the back of your business cards an appropriate definition of occupational therapy, not the one you memorized in school, but a practical definition that describes your practice and what you do. Give a card to everyone you meet, and tell them you are an occupational therapy practitioner.

**Work the Room**

Take advantage of social situations to spread the word about occupational therapy. While at a cocktail party, a man to whom I was introduced asked me what kind of work I did. I told him I was an occupational therapist and explained what it was. He handed me his card as he began a conversation with someone else, and he turned out to be the CEO of Burger King. What an opportunity I could have had!

**Publish Something**

To Spread the Word

Write something to spread the word about occupational therapy in your local newspapers. Some communities have throwaways that are always looking for articles. Consider a series on caring for elderly parents or series on wellness.

Write for non–occupational therapy publications to spread the word about occupational therapy, for example, lay publications such as women's magazines. During her doctoral studies, Elysa Lipschutz, PhD, OTR/L, tried to get her safety checklist for older people published in Good Housekeeping. Although the editor would not publish her article, the Good Housekeeping staff interviewed her for a story appearing in the October 2000 issue and credited her and occupational therapy for the information she provided.

Various trade organizations have their own publications. How about an article in Shoe News about putting on shoes when one has a disability or adapting shoes for persons with disabilities?

**Meet Your Legislators**

Make a commitment to visit your legislators annually, and bring your friends and colleagues. Tell them about occupational therapy. Write letters about our issues and encourage clients to write letters. If you do a good job with your clients, they will want to help you to promote occupational therapy.

Go to a fundraiser for a candidate. Tell the candidate that you are an occupational therapy practitioner and about our issues, and encourage him or her to support our issues. Share this information with friends, colleagues, and clients.

**Become a Media Mogul**

Karen Jacobs has her own cable access television program called “Lifestyles By Design.” Cable access programs are always looking for quality productions. Think of the topics you could discuss about occupational therapy and how we facilitate skills for the job of living. Many cable access stations will even teach you how to use cameras, and some have free classes in the basics of television production.

You can also promote occupational therapy on the noon news. Often, I see authors or others interviewed about topics that fall within the purview of occupational therapy, such as preventing falls in elderly persons, how to play with your baby, and “devices” to make your life easier.

Send press releases about occupational therapy to the newspaper. Put an “Occupational Therapy: Skills for the Job of Living” sticker on the envelope before you mail it. Start with OT Month in April, but do not stop there. When the local news does a story about a community concern such as high accident rates in older persons, send a press release about occupational therapy’s role in evaluating an older person’s ability to drive.

Nelson Vasquez, an occupational therapist in Miami, read his name in the gossip column of The Miami Herald because he is treating Congresswoman Ileana Ross-Lehtinen. Many people who read the gossip column now know that occupational therapists work with hand injuries.

**Think Toward the Future**

Where is our profession going, and how can I help it get there? As the hockey great Wayne Gretsky said, “I skate where the puck is going to be, not where it is” (Deep & Sussman, 1995, p. 207). Further, Peter Drucker tells us, “The talk you hear about change is not only stupid, it’s…dangerous. The only way you can manage change is to create it…By the time you catch up to change, the competition is ahead of you” (American Way Magazine, 2001).

Think carefully about your skills and knowledge and the commitment you can make. Make your own personal commitment to occupational therapy and ask not what your Association can do for you but what you can do for your profession.

**References**


