Academicians highly value theory, deal with it effectively. Major differences exist in many areas, including their perspectives for occupational therapy education and practice. By understanding this disparity more clearly, we can deal with it effectively. Major differences between education and practice exist in many areas, including their purpose or focus, their roles and functions, their values, and their outcome expectations.

In concurrence with the increased development of theoretical perspectives for occupational therapy during the past 10 to 15 years, academic institutions have assumed the teaching of theory as their mission. Academicians highly value theory, which provides a way of understanding why things happen. The reality of practice may be, however, that although clinicians also value understanding, they often must react to difficult and complex situations immediately and spontaneously. Clinicians, therefore, also highly value techniques for dealing with such situations. Additionally, the theories developed to date may not always be applicable to practice, and practitioners educated prior to the late 1970s have not had the opportunity to learn new theoretical approaches. Although many of these practitioners are excellent clinicians with expertise developed from years of practice, they are not necessarily able to verbalize their expertise in the most current theoretical terminology.

During the past decade, as the occupational therapy profession has developed, the health care system in which it operates has also undergone massive changes. Whereas theory evolution is a slow and methodical process, practice occurs in a rapidly changing system. This fluctuating system presents the professional education system with a constant challenge to teach effective roles and functions to new therapists who will be required to handle clinical responsibilities in adaptable, flexible, and dynamic ways. This discrepancy in our professional growth and development has created a disparity between the educational preparation of occupational therapists and the expectations they must meet in practice.

Academic and clinical systems also differ in the behaviors they reinforce. Whereas occupational therapists in academic settings are increasingly reinforced for research and publication, those in clinical settings are rewarded for high productivity, high patient turnover, and the use of reimbursable treatment modalities. This situation can lead to further alienation between the two systems, which view their purposes quite differently.

A clinical colleague of mine recently described the academic system as "pure." It is an idealistic place in which new recruits to the profession learn the basic constructs of occupational therapy in an uncontaminated way. Holistic treatment is taught as a value of occupational therapy, the priority placed on the individual client is emphasized, and purposeful activity is touted as the heart of occupational therapy. As students learn to evaluate and treat clients, they are not confronted with the many influences of the real world that occur in practice. At this point in their training, they are not developmentally ready to cope with the complexity of a system that is highly influenced by reimbursement issues, health care team conflicts, political constraints, and sociocultural demands on consumers and providers of health care services.

The identified discrepancy between education and practice evolves from all of the above factors. The question remains, "What can be done to bring the two systems closer together?" Some of the tension that exists between education and practice as a result of this disparity may be a positive factor in the growth and development of the profession. After all, the point of education is not just to train students in the use of reimburs-
able techniques and pragmatic and realistic treatment but to facilitate their development both personally and professionally. The occupational therapy profession must decide what to teach students in the academic curricula in order to prepare them most effectively for real-life practice while simultaneously providing them with a background that encompasses the underlying theoretical, and sometimes idealistic, principles of our profession.

However, to ignore the disparity is to invite continued interprofessional conflict that will ultimately weaken the profession of occupational therapy. Those OFF participants who discussed this issue at length strongly recommended that the core knowledge of occupational therapy be described and defined. This needs to be done at all levels of the educational hierarchy, including assistant, bachelor’s, master’s, and post-master’s. Furthermore, the description of competencies must include professional values and assumptions as well as knowledge and skills at each level. This could be done with scheduled, ongoing opportunities for dialogue and debate between academicians and clinicians.

Additionally, OFF participants emphasized the importance of developing close research links between the academic and practice communities. Such research can provide further validation of occupational therapy theory and practice. Again, this process will be facilitated by joint communication that culminates in action strategies.

The educators and clinicians who participated in the OFF Symposium were fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet and discuss many current issues relevant to occupational therapy. They recommended that new forums for dialogue and debate be established to address these issues at both national and local levels. Such meetings must occur on a regular ongoing basis in order to determine more specifically what the focus of occupational therapy is now and what it should be in the future. Maintaining some separateness, yet finding a connectedness between the goals, values, and outcomes of occupational therapy education and practice is a viable and necessary goal for the next decade.

The ISSUE IS provides a forum for debate and discussion of occupational therapy issues and related topics. The Contributing Editor of this section, Julia Van Deussen, strives to have both sides of an issue addressed. Readers are encouraged to submit manuscripts discussing opposite points of view or new topics. All manuscripts are subject to peer review. Submit three copies to Elaine Viseltear, Editor.

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