All organizations are guided by policies. In some organizations the policies are very rigid and confining whereas in others they are very general. In some organizations the policies exist primarily as unwritten rules and are transmitted by word of mouth from one level of management to another or from the past leadership to the new leadership. In other organizations policies are written down, detailed at length, and adhered to strictly.

For many years the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) managed its policies largely by the word-of-mouth system. Somehow in the minutes of various bodies in the association policies were implied but not formally stated as policies. These implied policies were followed as people remembered them, but there was no one place to find them. In 1976, a small task group was appointed to retrieve policies from old minutes and to present them to the Representative Assembly (at that time called the Delegate Assembly). The Representatives were asked to review them, determine what was current, determine what was missing or unclear, and adopt a formal set of policies for the Association. From this initial start the official Policy Manual of The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. (hereafter referred to as the Policy Manual) was established in 1978, and it has been updated ever since.

So what is policy, how is policy identified in AOTA, and how can each member influence policy? Policy is "a principle adopted by the organization designed to influence present and/or future course of action" (Policy Manual, Preface). Policy, which governs structure and activities, is determined at the highest level of decision making within an organization, in the case of AOTA, the level of the Representative Assembly. The Representative Assembly, which is representative of all members of AOTA, provides consistency in management decisions, defines restraints in decision making, and provides a means to delegate authority in conformance with the Bylaws. When all parts of the Association are attuned to the same guiding principles, teamwork results and the efforts of the Association are focused and directed for efficient operation and planning for the future.

However, policies that are not reevaluated regularly, can become so restraining that an organization loses its ability to respond to emerging issues. To prevent such a loss, the Representative Assembly meets every year to discuss, debate, and decide policy issues. The Representative Assembly may decide to introduce policy changes (or additional policies) in response to a changing environment and a changing focus in planning for the years ahead. Any member can influence change or policy by providing input to his or her Representative and recommend changes of or additions to policy by submitting a resolution through the established procedures. The continually changing policies are our footprints in the past and our signposts for the future.

AOTA Policies

The Policy Manual contains several different types of policies. The first group has to do with how we believe our organization should be run. For example, there are policies that state we should have a policy manual, a long-range plan, and an organization that is managed by objectives and with sound business principles such as avoidance of conflict of interest, in compliance with antitrust principles, and with careful attention to copyrights. Other policies state that there should be a corporate logo and that the membership, through the Representative Assembly, retains the right to approve the logo's design so that it always reflects the member's beliefs about their organization.

Other sections contain policies that govern budget and money management, all reflecting the guiding principle that the Association should be operated in a cost-effective manner to enable the best use of the members' money.
There is a cluster of policies that identify members’ rights and benefits: mandated open meetings, provisions for reduced membership fees in designated situations (i.e., if a member is disabled or retired), members’ right to be on committees, awards, and procedures for having new awards approved by the Representative Assembly.

There are policies that provide recommended parameters for our practice, for example, the policy entitled Establishment and Maintenance of Standards of Practice, Occupational Therapists and Modalities, Professional Nomenclature, Philosophical Base of Occupational Therapy, and Occupation as the Common Core of Occupational Therapy.

There are policies that direct our relations with those outside our profession, such as the policies entitled Formation of Coalitions, Grants/Contracts, Skills Taught to Other Professionals and Support Personnel, and Support of White House Conferences. These provide general principles and directions for relations with external organizations.

There are also policies that state what types of stances or positions we, as an organization, may take in response to events in our environment. For example, there are times when we, as a health profession, should take a stand on trends in the health, economic, social, and legislative environments. This has probably been the most difficult area of policies to develop because these policies must be formulated in reaction to an immediate situation rather than in careful consideration of developments anticipated for the next 10 years.

An Illustration

The policies that relate to education can be used to illustrate how policy affects our thinking and guides our direction.

In 1978, Resolution 524-78 was adopted authorizing a study of alternate methods of entry into the profession. One method was proficiency testing. This method allowed persons not having undergone a course of academic training in occupational therapy to enter the profession by passing a test. In 1979, proficiency testing was rejected as a method of entry into the profession (Resolution 551-79) and, therefore, was not included in the study authorized in 1978. This decision has become part of official policy as Policy 3.3, Proficiency Testing as a Method of Entry Into the Profession. One reason for the rejection of proficiency testing as a method of entry was our belief that it is very important to integrate liberal arts education with professional occupational therapy education. Another reason was the confusing picture that multiple entry routes into the profession would present to the consumer and the public.

Our thinking about the education provided occupational therapy assistants has undergone changes, too (Policy 3.4). As the concept of a certified occupational therapy assistant developed in 1958, a variety of educational programs were created. The first were as short as 6 weeks and were based in hospitals. They gradually became longer, and many became associated with an educational institution. In 1983, the Representative Assembly adopted a motion stating that “the American Occupational Therapy Association shall promote the establishment of Occupational Therapy Assistant educational programs at the Associate Degree level (now Policy 3.4). This policy reflects the belief that the associate degree level is the preferred level of education for the occupational therapy assistant. The policy provides clear direction for future action by the Association in regard to educational programs for occupational therapy assistants. In 1971, a plan was initiated to develop a method whereby certified occupational therapy assistants, after following certain prescribed guidelines and meeting certain eligibility criteria, would be able to take the certification examination for occupational therapists and, if they passed the test, be certified as registered occupational therapists. This entry method became known as the Career Mobility Program. In 1982, the Representative Assembly adopted a motion to terminate this program. The action states that no new applicants would be admitted to the program after a certain date and that current applicants in the program would have to complete the program by 1988. The alternative to this program was defined in Resolution 578-81, which is now Policy 3.6, Concept of Upward Mobility. This policy states that upward mobility for the certified occupational therapy assistant is supported and encouraged but that it should be achieved through attendance of accredited professional educational programs rather than through test taking only. This new policy, again, reflects the conviction that formal educational programs contribute strongly to the professional development of an occupational therapist.

In 1987, a report by the Entry-Level Study Committee entitled Occupational Therapy: Directions for the Future was presented to the Representative Assembly. This report resulted in a series of policies that direct the educational process of the people who enter our profession. The first of these policies, Policy 3.7, Liberal Arts and Sciences Foundation for Professional and Post Professional Education, supports a strong foundation in the liberal arts and sciences in the education of occupational therapists. It also emphasizes the importance of graduate education and any changes in existing programs that will help graduates develop the ability to “frame, analyze and solve complex clinical problems.” The next policy, Policy 3.8, Support of Graduate Education, which was also adopted in 1987, supports the development of master's and doctoral degrees and states that graduate education is valuable in the development of the profession because it “attracts bright, committed students . . .”, “educates practitioners who can address the complexities of health care . . .”, “provides initiative for advanced practice . . .”, and “creates a pool of qualified applicants for faculty positions.” This is followed by a Policy 3.9, Occupational Therapists Educated at the Doctoral Level, which states that occupational therapists need to be educated at the doctoral level, so that they can serve as faculty members and conduct clinical and academic research.

This series of policies is indicative of the change in our thinking about the education of those entering the profession. We see a change from
considering testing as a possible means of entry into the profession to stressing the need for a more formal liberal arts background to developing a future-oriented emphasis on graduate education.

Summary
Clearly established policies can guide our actions and activities and focus our attention. As our beliefs change so do our policies. It is the right as well as the responsibility of each of us as members of the American Occupational Therapy Association to watch for changes in our environment that might affect our thinking or our beliefs regarding our profession's role. Ideas for changes should be brought to the attention of the Representative Assembly, who will then be able to take action on possible policy changes. Our active involvement in this process will ensure that our policies are not just rigid, constraining dictums but are alive and changing with the times and truly reflect our footprints in the past and serve as our signposts for the future.

Reference