The American Journal of Occupational Therapy

Research Priorities of the Profession

From the Desk of the Editor

The *Centennial Vision* (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2007) urges the profession to provide evidence supporting the efficacy of occupational therapy in six broad practice areas: (1) children and youth; (2) productive aging; (3) mental health; (4) health and wellness; (5) work and industry; and (6) rehabilitation, disability, and participation. In recent years, the impetus for evidence-based practice has emerged largely from managed care organizations’ denial of services that do not possess efficacy research (Sung et al., 2003). However, the need to demonstrate efficacy of intervention has always been present and stems directly from health care’s contract with society to provide services that are effective and safe (Jette & Keysor, 2002).

In accordance with occupational therapy’s societal contract and in an effort to fulfill the mission of the *Centennial Vision*, the profession must strive to meet five specific research priorities:

1. Provide evidence for the efficacy of clinical practice
2. Test the reliability and validity of our assessment instruments
3. Examine how engagement in occupation can promote developmental milestones, health and wellness throughout the lifespan, and productive aging
4. Provide fundamental or basic research information regarding how specific disability experiences affect community and social participation—with the intent to ultimately use this information to develop clinical guidelines that can be tested for efficacy
5. Explore topical questions (i.e., current issues) whose answers will provide direction for the profession’s continued growth and evolution.

Efficacy of Practice

The term *efficacy* refers to four primary concepts: effectiveness, safety, cost and time efficiency, and patient satisfaction (Sussman, Valente, Rohrbach, Skara, & Pentz, 2006). When testing the efficacy of a specific clinical intervention (with a specific population), these four concepts are most commonly assessed in separate research studies. The concepts address the following research questions:

- Is this clinical intervention effective—In other words, does it provide the health benefits it purports to for a majority of clients?
- Is this clinical intervention safe—Can therapists be certain that the provision of the clinical intervention will not cause harm?
- Is this clinical intervention the most effective for the least amount of cost and time required?
- Is this clinical intervention acceptable to clients—Is it tolerable to clients and congruent with client health care goals?

Two articles in this issue of the journal are applied studies that test the effectiveness of intervention: “Teaching Chewing: A Structured Approach” and “Outcomes of a Pilot Training Program in a Qigong Massage Intervention for Young Children With Autism.” The articles contribute important information about the effectiveness of specific occupational therapy interventions, information required to refine clinical practice, and information needed to develop future studies having greater experimental rigor.

Reliability and Validity of Assessment Instruments

*Reliability* is the degree to which an instrument is able to consistently produce the same scores across raters and over time. *Validity* is the degree to which an instrument truly measures what it purports to (Warner, 2008). Testing our assessment instruments for reliability and validity is extremely important because such knowl-
edge enables practitioners to know whether a specific instrument is able to accurately identify clinical problems, offer trustworthy information from which to plan intervention, and accurately evaluate treatment outcomes. Without reliable and valid instruments, a practitioner’s ability to identify clinical problems and provide appropriate intervention is severely compromised.

Four articles in the current AJOT issue address the assessment of instruments used by occupational therapists: (1) “Factor Structure of the Four Motor-Free Scales of the Developmental Test of Visual Perception 2nd Edition (DTVP–2),” (2) “Development of a Performance-Based Assessment of Executive Function: The Children’s Kitchen Task Assessment,” (3) “Relationship Between Performance-Based and Self-Reported Assessment of Hand Function,” and (4) “Interater Reliability of a New Handwriting Assessment Battery for Adults.” These articles contribute important information about whether commonly used instruments are, in fact, valid and reliable.

Connection Between Occupation and Health

A third research priority is to examine how occupational engagement promotes human health throughout the lifespan. Many theorists have suggested that humans are occupational beings whose brains are designed to interact with the environment and others through the process of activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993) and that such activity is needed to maintain optimal cognitive, psychosocial, and physiological health (Wilcock, 2006). Such research information can, in part, provide a sound, scientific theoretical base for many of the profession’s most effective practice guidelines. Theoretical information can then be translated into practice guidelines for use in the clinic with specific populations. Information from research about the connection between health and occupational engagement can also enhance the public image of occupational therapy and help laypersons better understand the importance of participation in meaningful daily activities.

For example, the article “Playful Interaction: Occupational Therapy for All Children on the School Playground” offers unique insight regarding how children’s playground environments can be modified to promote coping, confidence, and leadership among typically developing children. On the basis of this research, further studies can be designed regarding modification of the play environments of children with disabilities to determine whether such modifications can produce the same facilitation of confidence, coping, and leadership observed in typically developing children. If environmental modification of playground environments is determined to be effective with children having disabilities, clinical guidelines for children with specific impairments can be established and then tested for efficacy. The article also points to an emerging role for occupational therapists involving modification of playground environments at the community and group levels, whereby the expertise of therapists can be used to create school and community playground environments that facilitate creativity, problem solving, social cooperation, and self-esteem for all children.

How Disability Experience Affects One’s Participation in Community Life

A fourth research priority involves exploring disability experiences and examining how such experiences affect one’s participation in the larger community. The ultimate goal of this research is to provide knowledge about the experiences of people with disabilities so that clinicians can develop clinical guidelines addressing concerns that clients identify as most critical. Such research is undertaken when no current information is available about how specific disability experiences affect community involvement. Once clinical guidelines based on this initial research have been developed, experimental studies can then be undertaken to test the guidelines’ efficacy.

In this issue, four studies provide foundational information regarding the ways in which specific disabilities affect participation in desired roles and activities in the larger community. One example is the case study “You Can Know Me Now If You Listen,” which provides exceptional insight into the sensorimotor experiences of a young man with autism and details an intensive treatment approach. Although this case study, like all case studies, lacks experimental rigor, it is nevertheless important because it offers initial information necessary to refine current clinical practice guidelines and design future experimental studies testing the efficacy of those guidelines.

Asking and Answering Topical Questions

A topical question is a critical issue that is presently debated in the profession and requires one or more decisions about the direction of the profession’s evolution. Past topical questions involved debate about the profession’s use of physical agent modalities (Ahlschweide, 1992), entry-level degree requirements (Pierce, Jackson, Rogosky-Grassi, Thompson, & Menninger, 1987), and alignment with the medical model (Shannon, 1977). A current topical question pertains to the role of clinical doctorates (Smith, 2007). The article “Student Outcomes in a Postprofessional Online Master’s-Degree Program” provides information needed to answer the topical question regarding acceptability of online postprofessional degrees (i.e., how well do online degree programs facilitate student satisfaction, educational preparedness, and an ability to develop advanced critical thinking and leadership skills?). Such information is necessary to determine whether online postprofessional-degree programs can adequately provide an educational format through which essential standards can be met.

Assessing How Well We Are Meeting Our Research Priorities

One method of assessing the viability of a profession is to determine whether members are meeting the profession’s research priorities. The sagacity of the Centennial Vision is that it has charged the profession to produce research needed to support the efficacy of practice in all major practice areas. It is an injunction requiring responsibility from all professional members because we all are affected by the continued viability or decline of the profession. Occupational therapy researchers must
team with clinicians to produce evidence for the efficacy of practice. Clinicians must examine the research literature to be able to select the most efficacious practice methods and use research to challenge insurer reimbursement and service denials. Educators must teach students to become consumers of research and learn the basics of research design. And students must strive to become practitioners who read the research literature and seek to become contributing members of research teams. In this way, every member of the profession assumes responsibility for establishing the body of research needed to sustain the profession over the next decades.

As editor-in-chief, I will periodically report how well the journal is fulfilling its mission to publish and solicit manuscripts meeting the research priorities of the profession. I look forward to working with you to meet the research mission outlined by the Centennial Vision.

References


