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.


**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-

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tive alerts to their senators and congress-成员 that promote AOTA’s legislative agenda. AOTA has provided Listservs to help its members network and seek and share information. Additionally, AOTA’s Web site provides a plethora of docu-
ments and other valuable, up-to-date information.

Promoting Innovative Occupational Therapy Practice
AOTA organized the development of 
award-winning practice guidelines. These tools for promoting occupational therapy explain what we do in a practical man-
ner, perfect for insurance adjusters and 
potential referral sources.

AOTA is promoting innovative practice for occupational therapy practi-
tioners in a number of ways. Numerous articles have appeared in OT Practice that describe occupational therapy practition-
ers’ involvement in a host of innovative programs. AOTA also is investigating new areas of practice for members. For example, the Association received a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Families and Schools Together grant to evaluate the effectiveness of 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 result-
ed 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 evaluations for children who miss significant developmental milestones.

The Representative Assembly voted to move the profession to a postbaccala-
ureate level of entry. This action puts occupational therapists on equal footing with other health care professionals, encourages research, and opens the door to wider career possibilities.

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 practi-
tioners to make an annual personal com-
mitment 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 
practice requires money. Consider mak-
ing a commitment to donate money to 
the National Awareness Campaign or to 
the American Occupational Therapy 
Political Action Committee or your state’s political action committee.

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 prac-
tice. 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 occupa-
tional 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 commit-
ment 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 pro-
gram intentionally eliminated occupa-
tional therapy from a storyline where it 
should have been included; because a 
newspaper article showed an occupa-
tional 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 mis-
characterizations of occupational therapy 
to enlighten the media with the truth. 
They write letters to the editor and 
counter articles presenting the occupa-
tional therapy perspective.

Technology Commitment
We all must get connected to the 
Internet and stay connected. We must 
keep up with the latest technological 
changes. Tom Peters (2001) believes that 
if you do not embrace technology, “you 
will be the unwitting victim, not the 
partner of change.” Your technological 
commitment can take you to creating or 
joining a Listserv to network with others.

Time Commitment
Just devoting your time can make a big 
difference in how people view occupa-
tional 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 med-
ical, osteopathic, optometric, or a 
physician’s assistant educational pro-
gram in your community about occupa-
tional therapy. Think of how many 
more referrals we could get for occupa-
tional therapy services if every physi-
cian, physician assistant, and 
opthometrist in the United States grad-
uated from school knowing about the 
benefits of occupational therapy.

Attitude Commitment
Voice your opinions to occupational thera-
py leaders and legislators. Let them know 
how you feel and make suggestions instead

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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.

**Commitment**

**Research 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.

**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 on 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