One of the reasons I enjoy being the editor of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy is the opportunity for a bird’s-eye view of the profession. The manuscripts streaming constantly across my desk represent the most salient topics for occupational therapists. I consider myself lucky to be exposed to such a broad spectrum of literature relative to practice, research, and education. Not only do I read all of the articles in each issue of AJOT (how many people can make that claim?), I also read those manuscripts that are not ultimately successful or that undergo extensive revision over several drafts. From this unique vantage point, I feel compelled to comment on a continual challenge in occupational therapy: remaining consistent in our writing with the philosophical underpinnings of occupational therapy while defining and expanding the scope of the profession.

The table of contents in this particular issue of AJOT provides an excellent example of the range and diversity of topics that legitimately exist within the domain of occupational therapy. Although five themes have been identified for the purposes of grouping the articles in this issue (Occupation-Based Therapy for Children; Practice-Related Topics; Issues in Physical Rehabilitation; Assessment; Applications for Assistive Technology), these themes are simultaneously too broad yet too narrow to be informative. The themes are too broad to meaningfully represent articles within each grouping that may range in topics from wrist splints to sexuality after spinal cord injury. On the other hand, the themes are too narrow to provide more than a nod at the philosophical base of the profession, which states “the understanding and use of occupations shall be at the central core of occupational therapy practice, education, and research” (AOTA, 2003, Policy 1.11). Some readers may conclude that the problem rests in the choice of themes and that a better job could be done finding the core elements of occupation in each article, then grouping those elements meaningfully. Perhaps that is a fair criticism, yet it belies the larger challenge facing the profession—a challenge that can only be apparent to the few of us who have read and edited several hundred manuscripts. For the most part, the literature directed at occupational therapy practice falls short of reflecting the rich, complex, and unique nature of occupation. Too often, manuscripts depict our clients as a set of hands in isolation from head or heart (similar to Wood’s (2004) depiction of decapitated therapists as heart separated from head). Although there are very clear exceptions, some of which are published in this very issue of AJOT, as a profession we struggle to write about practice in ways that keep the larger and more important purpose of our therapeutic efforts in the foreground. The basis for this observation comes less from the published articles than from working with authors whose works are never published or are revised repeatedly and extensively. A substantial proportion of manuscript revision is directed at clarifying the connections to occupational therapy as a profession based on a foundation of occupation.

AJOT reviewers and editors are committed to providing direction resulting in publications that explicate the domain of occupational therapy in a variety of settings or populations. Unfortunately, many manuscripts speak only to selected aspects of occupation, such as activity demands, performance patterns, or performance skills. Although these aspects of occupation are certainly vital to the profession, they fail to access the larger framework of meaningful participation in desired roles, contexts, or life situations. Authors must maintain the focus of the article on occupation...
rather than limiting the manuscript to selected aspects of occupation. For instance, let’s say an author wanted to submit a manuscript reporting preliminary testing (or a case illustration) of a cooking group for women who have had a stroke. No one would dispute that this is a legitimate topic for occupational therapy, and focusing the manuscript on therapeutic procedures might be a good beginning. However, consider the enhanced contribution of this manuscript to the profession if the author discussed how this experience was designed to reflect and support the occupations of the participants. The author could talk about the meaning associated with cooking for these women, how knowledge of that meaning was reflected in the therapeutic procedures and interactions, and specify methods used to extend the skills to participation in the context of daily life. By focusing the manuscript on the occupation of cooking for these participants during and beyond the therapy session and using this as the context for presenting therapeutic procedures (such as environmental modification and neurodevelopmental treatment), the manuscript becomes uniquely occupational therapy. This is vitally important because other professions also claim that similar therapeutic procedures fall within their scope of practice, and they have successfully pursued legislative and regulatory mechanisms to protect this claim. Potential authors should ask themselves how they could go beyond a narrow focus on the elements of occupational therapy and provide greater insight to readers about the relationship between the topic and “engagement in occupation to support participation in context” (AOTA, 2002, p. 611). Try keeping the visual image of an hourglass in mind—the topic may narrow in the middle but should begin and end with the big picture of occupation.

Our scope of practice is expanding for many reasons. The growth of occupation science as a basic science has resulted in greater understanding of the construct of occupation and its role in societal and individual health. The benefits of occupation are becoming more apparent to individual consumers and increasingly acknowledged by society. Educators are enhancing the learning experiences of students so that the next generation of occupational therapy practitioners will take the profession in new and exciting directions. On the other hand, many other professions are also expanding how they define their professional domains—some expansions are even regarded as threatening to occupational therapy. It seems to me that our scope of practice can be eroded only if the focus of our practice-related literature largely reflects the smaller elements of practice instead of maintaining the context of what makes us truly unique—occupation. ▲

References

Correction

The CONCLUSION in the abstract, page 182:
The TVPS–R PQ should not be used as an overall performance summary score. Of the seven TVPS–R subscales, five can be used with confidence (visual discrimination, visual-spatial relationships, visual-sequential memory, visual figure ground, and visual-closure) whereas the visual memory and visual form constancy (not visual-sequential memory) subscales are not recommended.

At the end of the Conclusion, page 192:
Of the seven TVPS–R subscales, five exhibited stronger levels of measurement properties whereas two had less than desirable results (VM and VFC [not VCF]).