Introduction

Occupational therapy, like other health professions, has responded to recent challenges to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services through increased integration of research evidence into clinical decision making. This effort has been international in scope, with a variety of activities including participation in critical reviews, database building, and instructional workshops for clinicians and academic faculty reported in several countries including Canada, Australia, Great Britain, and the United States. None of these countries have a sufficiently large pool of occupational therapists or sufficient resources to undertake the range of activities needed for optimal support of evidence-based occupational therapy. However, it seemed that the collective expertise of the international community could be organized in a systematic, collaborative effort toward this common goal. The plan was to create mechanisms that would maximize global access to health-related scientific evidence while supporting independent local decision making (Eisenberg, 2002).

An international conference on evidence-based occupational therapy was designed by a planning committee comprised of Dr. Wendy Coster, Dr. Mary Law, Dr. Jessica Scheer, and staff persons Deborah Lieberman (American Occupational Therapy Association; AOTA) and Nedra Gillette (American Occupational Therapy Foundation; AOTF) with the following objectives:

1. To identify a set of priority initiatives that would facilitate efficient and effective evidence-based practice (EBP) in occupational therapy
2. To identify current efforts to address these needs as well as areas where new initiatives are needed
3. To design a collaborative structure that could support efforts directed at priority initiatives
4. To generate consensus guidelines for evaluating and reporting research evidence to ensure high quality, consistency, and accessibility to the primary users (practitioners, health care service administrators, and consumers)
5. To set specific target outcomes for the next year to achieve progress in addressing the priority needs

These objectives were incorporated into a proposal submitted to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) for support to hold an international conference on EBP in occupational therapy. The proposal was funded, allowing AOTA and AOTF to host an exciting conference that was held in Bethesda, Maryland, July 11–14, 2004.

The Conference Process

Selection of Participants: Conference participants were selected according to the following criteria:

1. Individual expertise and commitment to EBP, as evidenced by peer-reviewed publications and/or presentations on EBP topics at major national and international conferences
2. Expertise that contributed toward coverage of relevant EBP content areas and topics
3. Broad international representation

In addition, representatives from developing countries who might not have met the criteria noted above were purposefully included to facilitate the dissemination of the conference outcomes and to collect information regarding the need for resources and educational programs in their countries.

Because the primary expense of the conference was international travel and lodging of conference participants, the maximum number of participants was estimated to be 30.

As we worked to balance these criteria we identified potential representatives from 13 countries: Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Sweden, England, Israel, Italy, South Africa, Hong Kong, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

Structure of the Conference

The Planning Committee designed the conference to provide maximum opportunity for debate and discussion around the three major conference topics: critical review and synthesis of the literature, knowledge transfer, and practitioner education.

Working sessions alternated between Task Group assignments and deliberations, and Plenary Group sessions where task groups reported back on the direction of their discussion, sharing tentative goals and procedures that were under consideration.
The feedback provided through the plenary sessions allowed each group to remain focused, but also identified areas of overlap where collaboration would be essential.

In preparation for the conference, participants completed a preconference survey designed to solicit information about the organized EBP activities in each nation related to the three focused areas of the conference: critical review and syntheses of the literature, knowledge transfer or databases, and practitioner education. The information collected from the surveys about each nation was synthesized into a preconference workbook, which was disseminated to all conference participants prior to the conference. This allowed all participants to be “on the same page,” and to focus the presentations and discussions on identifying and prioritizing the major tasks and next steps in each of the three areas.

Outcomes of the Conference

The conference outcomes are summarized below according to the recommendations of each of the three task groups. They are presented in outline form, but more extensive discussion of the priorities and the tasks and timelines necessary for their implementation can be found in the final report of the conference on the AOTA (www.aota.org) and AOTF (www.aotf.org) Web sites.

Group 1: Critical Review and Synthesis

The group identified and discussed the following key issues:

1. How can we best identify and link ongoing efforts to review and synthesize evidence to avoid duplication of effort?
2. What structure or framework would be most effective to classify or catalog existing evidence to facilitate maximum access?
3. Given the multiple audiences and purposes for occupational therapy evidence, which areas should receive priority attention for future review and synthesis efforts?

Group 2: Knowledge Transfer

The group focusing on knowledge transfer issues centered its discussion on issues of the production, dissemination, and utilization of evidence in occupational therapy practice.

The group identified and discussed the following key issues:

1. What are the most effective methods to make evidence available and easily accessible to occupational therapists around the world?
2. What standards or guidelines could be developed and used to guide the production of occupational therapy knowledge transfer materials?
3. What methods would assist in making EBP information “a living and meaningful story” for occupational therapy practitioners around the world?

One important outcome of work in the first two task groups was a recommendation to seek support for maintenance and further development of OTSeeker from the international occupational therapy community.

Group 3: Practitioner Education

The task group determined that the primary effort should be directed toward strengthening the educational materials used in occupational therapy curricula and expending resources toward faculty development in the areas of research and EBP.

Key issues in educating faculty and students with regard to EBP included the following:

1. Providing systematic access to educational materials that give faculty the resources they need, allowing them to integrate EBP instruction appropriately within their curricula
2. Establishing a shared funding mechanism through WFOT [World Federation of Occupational Therapists] memberships that would permit hiring a director for an international EBP education center
3. Achieving international agreements to facilitate exchange of information and access to publications, and to promote policy to support higher achievement in the education process for faculty, students, and practitioners
4. Addressing the gap between those who do and do not have adequate resources for teaching and using EBP through a funded program to bring together occupational therapy educators from developed and developing countries

Significance and Implications

Occupational therapists in the international community, like their colleagues in other disciplines, have expressed their commitment to establishing the principles and methods of EBP within our discipline. We view commitment to use the best available evidence in clinical decision making as a fundamental element to ethical practice. At the same time, we recognize the many barriers within and outside the profession to acquiring and using the skills necessary for EBP. This conference represented a collaborative response by representatives from around the world to try to address those barriers collectively.

The results of this conference speak to the strength of the collaborative partnerships forged between occupational therapists from many different countries. This gathering enabled a lively and exciting discussion of the development and promotion of evidence-based occupational therapy from a more global perspective. Within the three discussion groups, specific doable priorities and tasks have been developed. Timelines and responsibilities have been assigned for each of these tasks to ensure that the momentum that was established at the conference continues. It is clear from reports received since the conference that several of the tasks are already on their way to completion (e.g., development and funding for an evidence-based occupational therapy Web portal). Conference participants have committed to return to their countries and facilitate other occupational therapists to participate in these activities.

Through the funding provided by AHRQ, we were able to bring together a group of occupational therapists who are committed to serve as the seeds of a larger collaborative effort to improve resources for evidence-based occupational therapy education and practice. We began by documenting what has been accomplished to date in EBP by occupational therapists worldwide; these accomplishments are already impressive. Through the conference, we identified a number of immediate
activities that could be undertaken to facilitate greater access to and support for EBP resources. An international, freely accessible Web portal will be developed to house evidence-based occupational therapy resources and to facilitate ongoing discussion about the development and implementation of EBP. All of the conference’s work was guided by the framework of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), reflecting the occupational therapy community’s support for this framework as the international language for discussion and action on issues related to disability and health. The language and thinking of the ICF will continue to guide all of the task groups’ subsequent activities.

The conference planning group is also committed to working with colleagues around the world to facilitate implementation of the priorities identified at conference. It is our belief that these activities have substantial potential to improve the integration of evidence into occupational therapy practice over the next several years.▲

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Reference