The Issue Is

Is It Not Always Time for New Research Ideas?

Congratulations to graduate students Lisa Timmerman and Cindy Schmidt, and to their advisor, Dr. Stephen Hearter, for demonstrating their commitment to occupational therapy and its research. This oft-ignored domain, which provides the necessary underpinnings for both practice and education, deserves the kind of programs they recommend. We would like to take their ideas one step further and share with you some additional strategies now under consideration by the American Occupational Therapy Foundation's (AOTF) Research Advisory Council.

**Reward Published Research With Continuing Education Units**

This strategy is a great idea, and could be broadened to include other research-related experiences, such as belonging to one of the research teams that constitute the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)–AOTF biannual Research Symposia, or serving as a data collector for a research study in one's clinical or educational environment. AOTF is now designing clinical outcomes studies and will be looking for sites to train clinicians as data collectors.

Another opportunity for research experience is to attend one of the two Research Institutes sponsored by AOTF at the upcoming 1994 CANAM Conference. One institute is dedicated to developing better teaching strategies to incorporate research into the curriculum; the second is specifically directed toward clinicians, to help them learn how to read and recognize when (or whether) they should apply the findings from specific research articles to their practice.

The appropriate bodies within our state associations are encouraged to present the challenge of CEUs for research to their state licensure boards. Considerable persuasion may be needed to show these boards how research-related learning can have a powerful effect on the quality of care in occupational therapy.

**Institute Low-Cost Seminars**

AOTF is always ready to help organize local or regional workshops on specific elements of research. Team leaders or research consultants with experience are needed to serve as mentors after the workshop. Past experience with 14 workshops (5 on "Partnerships in Research," 5 on "Research Begins With a Small ‘r,’" and 6 from the ongoing Special Interest Section Research Symposia Series) has shown that unless the participants become members of a team led by a research mentor, no research studies are forthcoming. Studies led by a mentor have flourished. Many clinicians who joined these teams have continued to pursue other research opportunities; several have decided to return to graduate school to learn and participate in the entire research process. Becoming competent in doing and publishing research requires a doctorate, usually a PhD, which is the current standard in Western society. It is unlikely that occupational therapists can learn research independently with less rigorous preparation, although introductory experiences provided through continuing education may help therapists recognize the opportunities offered by pursuing research as part of their career ladder.

For a nice introduction to the research mentors' network for both experienced and beginning therapists, readers might attend the Research Mentors' 'Wine and Cheese Social Hour,' sponsored by AOTF, at the annual conference. This event is concurrent with the graduate students' research poster session and provides a nice introduction to the research mentors' network. Both events follow the annual Research Forum, which was attended by more than 200 people in 1993.

**Increase AOTF Funds and Accessibility**

What an excellent idea, to levy a research tax on AOTA members! In the near future many occupational therapy jobs will depend on the profession's ability to justify its reimbursement by demonstrating outcomes and cost-effectiveness of care. Few occupational therapists feel capable of engaging in such research, and we suspect that they would be delighted to pay an additional $2 per year, maybe even $5, to support the research that will help them save their jobs!

Table 1 shows what has been accomplished with the research funds allocated by AOTF since 1979. Innovation grants support bright ideas and usually result in pilot studies. All AOTA members are eligible to receive these grants. Consultation is available for preparation.

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Table 1
What Has Been Accomplished With the Research Funds Allocated by AOTF Since 1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Studies Initiated</th>
<th>Total Funds Committed ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>111 innovation studies</td>
<td>$297,197.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Outcomes studies</td>
<td>$192,904.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Research symposia grants</td>
<td>$200,813.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Student grants</td>
<td>$13,941.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Dissertation research grants</td>
<td>$200,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Post-Doctoral fellowships</td>
<td>$100,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Special projects</td>
<td>$90,952.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$1,095,808.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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of proposals and for writing manuscripts. Since 1990, graduate students have been able to compete for a small segment of the innovation grant money, for requests up to $1,000. A total of $12,941.76 has supported 17 of these student grants. Approximately one third of the other innovation grants in the past 12 years have gone to persons who were pursuing graduate work, either as co-investigators or as independent investigators.

Negotiate With Employers for Research Support

A therapist’s willingness to pursue research, like advancement in any domain, depends on a certain degree of self-confidence and a recognition of competence and skill in executing the new tasks. Therapists who asked employers for support to attend AOTA-AOTF Research Symposia have almost always been granted time and money, along with enthusiastic praise for their interest. The value of learning to do research, especially when it entails collecting outcomes data, does not escape today’s employer.

Most therapists have not been socialized into a profession that truly values research, because few faculty members or clinical supervisors are engaged in research while they are serving as role models. The minimal requirements for research, as determined by the Essentials and Guidelines for an Accredited Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist (AOTA, 1991), do not often yield graduates who believe that they have the skill to undertake research. If the socialization process of doing research had occurred and students had collaborated with faculty at some level in executing a simple research study, graduates would have a different expectation for themselves and greater interest in pursuing research by finding colleagues and mentors to help them.

Most therapists today also believe that their work loads are too heavy to allow them to undertake research. We are working to develop some studies that allow clinicians to make important contributions to the research process, in ways that will not place too great a demand on their clinical roles. In addition, employers who are presented with a request to support research by providing release time to therapists may find it advantageous to do so. Research colleagues in other disciplines may be readily available, if the occupational therapist takes the initiative to inquire.

In closing, we commend these authors for their insightful suggestions concerning the relationship between education and research. We urge all occupational therapists to recognize that when there are deficits in education and research across a profession, there will most certainly be deficits in the practice arena. Our clinicians deserve the support that comes from sound clinical studies, to give them the answers they need to meet their daily clinical challenges.

The Foundation department in this issue of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy presents the new Long-Range Plan for Research, which was developed by the Research Advisory Council and approved by the AOTF Board of Directors and the AOTA Executive Board. The plan permits budget proposals for research to be responsive to the current priorities of both AOTA and AOTF. This plan, if fully implemented, would address the problems discussed in this article and the one by Timmerman, Schmidt, and Heater. We hope readers will send us their comments and recommendations, to assist in making this the research plan of our future.

Reference

THE ISSUE IS provides a forum for debate and discussion of occupational therapy issues and related topics. The Contributing Editor of this section, Julia Van Deusen, strives to have both sides of an issue addressed. Readers are encouraged to submit manuscripts discussing opposite points of view or new topics. All manuscripts are subject to peer review. Submit three copies to Elaine Vselebar, Editor.

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