Letters to the Editor

Language Should Not Be Barrier to Professional Entry

This is my reaction to the Nationally Speaking column, "Understanding Certification: Issues in Fairness," by McFadden, in the journal’s September 1985 issue.

The term fair is synonymous with unbiased and unprejudiced. I feel that the certification examination is not fair as long as it is prejudiced and biased against the U.S. citizens whose primary language is Spanish. The Certificate of Incorporation of the National Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy, Inc., in its articles, does not include nor refer to the language its members are to use in practicing occupational therapy.

The registration examination of AOTA intends to measure the initial competence in occupational therapy of a person wishing to belong to AOTA, not the language proficiency to practice this profession in the USA.

An examination that measures initial competence in occupational therapy is a valid examination to our association, no matter what language it is presented in, as long as the question content is the same. The cost of the translation of present and future examination questions is so small that it should be fair to use AOTA funds for this expense, especially when fairness in the examination has a high priority in budget planning.

Many U.S. citizens, for cultural reasons, have Spanish as their primary language. All of them have been trained in accredited occupational therapy programs. Moreover, occupational therapists are badly needed by the growing Spanish-speaking population of our nation.

Today, no extra time to complete the examination is given to therapists trained in Puerto Rico, but this used to be accepted practice not too long ago. Why was this practice changed?

McFadden cites Naisbitt’s projection that by 1990 Spanish-speaking Americans will be the nation’s largest ethnic group. She quotes his opinion that the debate on bilingual education will eventually have to be settled in favor of the Spanish-speaking population. She states that bilingual issues were partially addressed in 1980 by AOTA President Mac Hightower Vandamm and 5 years later in the Manpower Commission Report. Yet in her final discussion, she forgets all of these arguments to quote Rawlins on the subject of fairness, with what sounds like a claudication.

It is time to move to fairness without prejudice or bias.

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The Author’s Response

Many letters have been received by the Certification Committee from individuals living in Puerto Rico. These letters carry the same basic message—language should not be a barrier to professional entry.

As Chair of the Certification Committee, I would like to assure you that the Committee takes seriously the issues raised in letters such as yours. At its November 1985 meeting, the Certification Committee concluded that the issue of English as a second language warranted specific attention, and in an effort to gain a better understanding of the needs of those candidates who do not use English as their primary language, an in-depth study of this topic was undertaken. As part of this study, two national surveys were conducted, current cost projections for the development of both Spanish and COTA examination in Spanish were obtained, and a description of the educational program in Puerto Rico as well as a description of the English comprehension requirements within that curriculum were reviewed. This information was subsequently considered by the Certification Committee and the Standards and Ethics Commission (SEC) at their April 1986 meetings.

It was the decision of the SEC that issues associated with bilingualism and multilingualism have broader implications for the Association as a whole and should not be considered a certification-specific issue. As a result, the SEC decided to further explore the issues associated with English as a second language and additionally recommended that the Certification Committee make no changes in the certification examination process until an Association position on the broader issue could be formulated.

I hope that this letter conveys the sense of seriousness with which the Committee and AOTA have undertaken the task of studying this very important matter. We are confident that a fair, reasonable, and practical resolution will come of all of these efforts.

Susan M. McFadden, MEd, OTR, Chair
Certification Committee, AOTA

Fairness in Membership Matters

Regarding McFadden’s "Issues in Fairness" article (Sept. 1985) I would like to say that the certification committee seems to be going to great lengths to accommodate the needs of the members. Fairness, however, should be considered in other matters. AOTA membership dues are becoming a hardship: in my country $100 is half of my monthly salary. I received my degree from Boston University, graduating magna cum laude. I have benefited immensely from the educational opportunities in the United States during my 8-year stay. I am continuing to do so in Israel, but with limited funds. It seems unfair to me to cut off therapists from current developments in occupational therapy simply because they cannot afford the required dues.

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