

POSITION PAPER:

Occupational deprivation

About Occupational Therapy Australia

Occupational Therapy Australia is the professional association for occupational therapists in Australia.

Our members are qualified occupational therapists employed throughout the public and private sectors. They provide health care, vocational rehabilitation, and consultancy to clients.

Our mission is to provide member benefits through access to local professional support and resources, and through opportunities to contribute to, and shape, professional excellence.

For more information about Occupational Therapy Australia, visit www.otaus.com.au.

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Occupational Therapy Australia position papers are authored by members of Occupational Therapy Australia's Special Interest Groups and undergo review by the Association's membership.

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1 Introduction: the occupational therapy profession

“Occupational therapy is a person-centred profession concerned with promoting health and wellbeing through occupation. The primary goal of occupational therapy is to enable people to participate in the activities of everyday life. Occupational therapists achieve this outcome by working with people and communities to enhance their ability to engage in the occupations they want to, need to, or are expected to do, or by modifying the occupation or the environment to better support their occupational engagement.” (World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) 2012).

2 Purpose of position paper

The purpose of this position statement is to outline the position of Occupational Therapy Australia in relation to occupational deprivation. This position statement is intended for occupational therapists but may also be useful for individuals and groups interested in working towards the creation of a fairer and more socially inclusive Australia.

Occupational deprivation is described as “a state of preclusion from engagement in occupations of necessity and/or meaning due to factors that stand outside the immediate control of the individual” (Whiteford, 2010, p. 201). Physical, social, attitudinal, discriminatory, professional, institutional, racial, legislative, and political impediments to participation in any occupation that a person needs or wants to do could potentially be regarded as occupationally depriving.

Health and wellbeing depend upon being able to engage in occupations that are meaningful and of one’s choosing and this is well evidenced by international research. Conversely, being prevented from engaging in meaningful occupations can lead to psychological and physical illness, impairment, and reduced productivity.

Understanding and/or addressing factors that restrict or limit engagement in occupations for individuals, communities, and social groups are a large part of the core business of occupational therapy.

Although Australia is in many ways a fair and inclusive society, there are notable inequalities that exist for some groups which can lead to occupational deprivation. These include but are not limited to:

- individuals who are incarcerated
- refugees and asylum seekers who are placed in detention and processing centres both in Australia and offshore
- people with disability or mental illness
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- those living in geographically isolated environments (for example, Australian rural locations categorised as “remote”)
- those living on or below the minimum income
- people experiencing homelessness
- people experiencing long term unemployment.

3 Policy and environmental context

Australia is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural

Rights. Based on the rights identified in these documents, occupational therapy, as a profession concerned with health and wellbeing through equitable participation, has both a mandate and a responsibility to ensure these rights are protected. Domestic legislation such as the Anti-Discrimination Act support occupational therapists to actively reduce inequalities and to address instances of occupational injustice, that is, where people are prevented from equitable participation in society.

4 Position statement

The occupational therapy profession asserts that humans depend upon being able to participate in individually and culturally meaningful occupations in order to survive and experience positive health, wellbeing, and life satisfaction. Occupational deprivation is the condition of being prevented or precluded from participation and engagement in occupations of necessity, obligation, and choice. Occupational deprivation has serious consequences – it reduces people’s capacities and significantly diminishes health, wellbeing, and quality of life. Occupational therapists work with individuals and groups to facilitate meaningful participation in the activities of everyday life. The profession also has a role in building partnerships to challenge those external factors that prevent participation in occupations and lead to occupational deprivation. This may include challenging attitudes, physical barriers, funding regimes, and institutional as well as public policy. In attempting to address occupational deprivation in different sites and contexts (through the promotion of participation in meaningful occupations), the profession draws upon its rights-based philosophy of occupational justice. This is a growing focus in practice internationally and one that requires collaborative processes at all stages (Townsend & Whiteford, 2005; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004; Whiteford & Pereira, 2012).

5 Role of occupational therapists

Occupational Therapy Australia believes that the occupational therapy profession has a role to play in reducing instances of occupational deprivation in Australian society. Actions to enhance occupational justice and reduce occupational deprivation in Australian society include:

- building collegial and collaborative partnerships with people and groups that experience occupational deprivation, as well as with other key organisations to identify and actively address occupational deprivation
- encouraging occupational therapists, community groups, organisations, governments, and the Australian public to work towards removing the social, attitudinal, physical, economic, institutional, professional, racial, and political factors that create occupational deprivation
- designing, developing, and/or providing programs that mitigate the negative impacts of occupational deprivation and enhance optimal levels of performance, productivity, and wellbeing, and that enable participation
- removing physical environmental barriers to participation by promoting environmental design that facilitates universal access.

Examples of occupational therapists enhancing occupational justice and reducing occupational injustice include:

- increasing occupational therapists’ awareness of – and action towards – promoting occupational justice and human rights in institutional settings (Galvin, Wilding & Whiteford, 2005)
- collaborating with individuals, communities, organisations, and governments to reduce and/or eliminate occupational injustice (Townsend & Hocking, 2015)
- building awareness of occupational deprivation through dialogue, reflection on practice, listening to clients’ experiences, communities of practice, and research. See, for example, Perkes et al’s (2015) work on reclaiming occupation in a forensic and justice mental health setting
- providing occupation-focused occupational therapy services that reduce instances of occupational deprivation in the lives of individuals and communities.

6 Recommendations

Increasing awareness of instances of occupational deprivation and injustice is the first step towards tackling these situations and the negative impacts they can have on people in Australia. Awareness raising at a professional level can be achieved through sharing practice examples, participating in ongoing professional development, and engaging in best practice research. At a broader level, occupational therapists can shape public policy and mobilise resources for programs that tackle occupational deprivation and promote occupational justice and social inclusion through participation in everyday activities.

Recommendations to enable the above nationally include:

- continuing professional development on recognising and actively addressing occupational deprivation and occupational injustice through practice innovation
- working in partnerships with individuals, communities, organisations, and governments to tackle occupational deprivation through a range of means including (but not limited to) institutional and policy reform, environmental adaptation, program development, and targeted educational campaigns
- centralising rights-based approaches in practice, irrespective of setting or practice context
- enhancing understandings of the experience of occupation deprivation (as a complex phenomenon) through supporting applied research in this area.

7 Conclusion

Occupational therapy's core domain of concern is enabling engagement in occupation for all people. Engaging in meaningful and valuable occupations is fundamental to human health, wellbeing, and quality of life. It is also a right and one that requires protection. Occupational therapists can actively protect this right and work towards their goals of facilitating occupational engagement by removing barriers, adapting environments, providing opportunities and resources, and developing capabilities. These efforts will contribute to a more equitable Australia in which people can realise their potential, irrespective of where they live, their age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or ability level.

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