

**Government of Tasmania  
Department of Treasury**

***2022-23 State Budget Community  
Consultation***

Occupational Therapy Australia submission

December 2021

## Introduction

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Tasmanian Government's 2022-23 State Budget Community Consultation.

OTA is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. As of September 2021, there were more than 25,300 registered occupational therapists working across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in Australia, 368 of these in Tasmania (AHPRA, 2021).

Occupational therapists are allied health professionals whose role is to enable their clients to participate in meaningful and productive activities. They provide a wide range of services including physical and mental health therapy, vocational rehabilitation, chronic disease management, assessments for assistive technology and home modifications, and key disability supports and services.

Occupational therapists are highly valued in their communities and contribute significant savings to the health system by enhancing independence, preventing hospitalisation and expediting hospital discharge. Unfortunately, occupational therapy practice in Tasmania is currently hindered by a range of policy and funding decisions, as well as significant workforce shortages.

To enable occupational therapists to operate effectively in Tasmania, OTA recommends that the Tasmanian Government invest in delivering:

- More favourable remuneration and employment conditions to support attraction and retention of occupational therapists in the Tasmanian Health Service (THS);
- Increased funding for the THS to provide placement opportunities for occupational therapy students from the University of Tasmania;
- Funding to support the uptake of digital data capture and utilisation across the health care system; and
- Increased number of discipline-specific mental health roles for occupational therapists within the THS, as well as inclusion of occupational therapists in all relevant mental health funding programs.

## Workforce Shortage

Currently, demand for occupational therapy services outstrips supply. This is evidenced by recent data from the National Skills Commission (2021), which identified a shortage of occupational therapists in almost all Australian states and territories, including Tasmania. Unsurprisingly, markets are particularly thin outside of major cities and regional centres.

According to OTA Divisional Chair, Ms Fiona O'Keeffe, ongoing workforce shortages are contributing to the underutilisation of occupational therapists across the health system:

*"When an elderly person comes in with a fractured hip, for example, right from the beginning, part of the planning is how we are going to get them home...OT is central to that because if you can prevent an admission, you can save billions of dollars.*

*But what we are hearing, from our chief OTs, is everyone is so busy that people aren't able to really practice to their widest scope of practice. So they are just putting out fires,"* (cited in *The Examiner*, 2021).

(For data concerning the health and economic impact of preventable falls – and the benefit of occupational therapy assessment and intervention – refer to Appendix 1.)

Furthermore, OTA members report that demand for occupational therapy services is likely to increase, as sufferers of "long COVID" seek reablement and rehabilitation services in both in-patient and community settings.

Despite this high demand for services, employers consistently report significant challenges in recruiting occupational therapists to roles in Tasmania. This is supported by recent survey data collected by the Commonwealth Government.

According to the survey data, employers recruiting occupational therapists in Tasmania were unable to fill the majority of their vacancies (Department of Employment, 2019). Vacancies were located across Tasmania and were for a variety of settings, including public and private hospitals, aged care facilities and private practices (Department of Employment, 2019).

All employers sought qualified (at the bachelor or master's level) and suitably experienced applicants who were registered, or eligible for registration, with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Department of Employment, 2019). Employers considered 30 per cent of qualified applicants unsuitable due to a lack of required experience; for example, in a clinical setting or acute/sub-acute care, or the ability to work independently (Department of Employment, 2019).

According to the survey, employers received an average of 0.8 applicants per vacancy, an average of 0.7 qualified applicants and, when experience was factored in, an average of just 0.5 suitable applicants (Department of Employment, 2019). As a result, only 32 per cent of vacancies were filled (Department of Employment, 2019).

The reasons for these recruitment challenges are complex. In the past, a lack of education pathways within Tasmania meant employers often relied on recruiting occupational therapists from the mainland. Those who wished to study occupational therapy had to do so interstate, and a proportion of these chose not to return at the conclusion of their course.

OTA therefore welcomes the introduction of a Master of Occupational Therapy program at the University of Tasmania in 2022 and hopes that, in time, this will alleviate some of the recruitment challenges impacting employers of occupational therapists in Tasmania.

At the same time, it is essential that the Tasmanian Government address the barriers to attracting occupational therapists from mainland Australia. This includes a limited number of permanent positions in the THS, which may be more likely to entice occupational therapists

to relocate; and a lack of accessible rental properties for those health professionals who accept locum contracts in the state (*The Examiner*, 2021).

More broadly, consideration should also be given to barriers to long-term retention including:

- Lack of pay parity with similar roles in mainland Australia;
- Limited opportunities to work to the full scope of occupational therapy practice, including provision of prevention and early intervention services;
- Limited opportunities for income growth and career progression, with a limited number of clinically oriented senior positions for occupational therapists; and
- High levels of emotional load and workplace stress – compounded upon by limited opportunities for mentoring, supervision and support – which can result in burnout.

***Recommendation 1: That the Tasmanian Government explore options to attract occupational therapists from outside of Tasmania, such as relocation support and more favourable employment conditions.***

***Recommendation 2: That the Tasmanian Government invest in a longer-term strategy which addresses barriers to workforce retention for occupational therapists and other allied health professionals.***

## University of Tasmania

As indicated above, it is essential that Tasmanians have local options for becoming an allied health professional, and are able to complete courses that are responsive to community health needs across the different regions. The University of Tasmania, as part of its Allied Health Expansion Project, will offer a Master of Occupational Therapy degree in 2022.

OTA and its members welcome this initiative and are pleased to support the delivery of high-quality student placements, which are needed to enable students to build their confidence and competencies. In practice, OTA members report that it may be challenging for THS employees and private practitioners to take on students due to high and complex caseloads, lack of available time to provide supervision and support, and limited workspace.

To enable the effective operation of student placements within the THS, OTA calls on the Tasmanian Government to provide funding for more student educators within the THS and for more workspaces to accommodate staff and students safely in a COVID-19 environment.

OTA also believes that education should play a key role in addressing the present maldistribution of the occupational therapy workforce, ensuring all Tasmanians enjoy equitable access to health services.

Regular and meaningful rotations through regional and remote locations during the training of medical and allied health professionals heighten the likelihood that the student will eventually settle and practice in such a location. This is most easily achieved by way of training networks that link major metropolitan hospitals with smaller regional and rural hospitals. The provision of rural-based scholarships and fellowships is another means of

attracting students and recent graduates to locations outside our major cities.

***Recommendation 3: That the Tasmanian Government support the provision of occupational therapy student placements within the THS by providing increased funding for student educator roles and increased capacity in terms of workspace.***

***Recommendation 4: That the Tasmanian Government support the development of training networks, rural scholarships and other initiatives to attract students and recent graduates to work in rural and regional locations.***

## Digital investment

Despite the sheer amount of data collected, the healthcare system continues to struggle to provide value-based, person-centred care. Data is collected in many different systems that often do not “talk to” each other, meaning vitally important information could be missed.

Generally, allied health information captured in the primary care sector resides in separate systems, siloed from the broader health system. For many allied health services, the majority of information continues to be collected on paper. Failure to keep up with technology that is available in the health sector is a significant impediment to the timely sharing of information and the making of decisions with a holistic view of the person’s medical history.

Allied health must be involved in advancing healthcare by moving away from paper and document-centric health information capture, towards more data-driven and technology-enabled information capture and use. Investment is needed to support access to data reporting and analysis support for occupational therapists and other allied health teams to easily use it for decision making and service evaluation and design.

OTA concurs with the Health Informatics Society of Australia (HISA) 2019 position statement *Allied Health Professionals: the untapped potential in digital health* which states:

“Allied health professionals are an untapped potential in digital health. We are uniquely positioned to maximise the benefits achievable from digital health. The time for action is now. This position statement outlines four recommendations for immediate action.

1. Leadership - Create leadership roles in allied health informatics at major hospitals, public and private health services across the healthcare sector.
2. Education - Develop informatics education for allied health.
3. Teams - Ensure clinical informatics teams include a strong allied health presence to spark further innovation.
4. Enable - Allied health informaticians to champion data quality standards, interoperability and information system governance.”

***Recommendation 5: That the Tasmanian Government invest in improved medical record systems, enabling occupational therapists and other allied health teams to better utilise data to support decision making and service evaluation and design.***

## Mental Health

Mental health is a longstanding and core area of practice in occupational therapy, dating back to the beginning of the profession. Occupational therapists work across the full spectrum of mental health. This includes relatively common conditions, such as anxiety and mood disorders, as well as those which require more targeted interventions, such as psychosis, eating disorders and trauma-related conditions.

This expertise is nationally recognised and well-established. Suitably experienced occupational therapists are endorsed to provide focussed psychological strategies through the Commonwealth Government's Better Access Initiative, and have been since its inception in 2006. Eligible occupational therapists also deliver psychological treatments for eating disorders under the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

Whilst occupational therapists utilise many of the same psychological therapies as other mental health professions, they are uniquely skilled in using 'occupations' to improve wellbeing. Through the prescription of graded tasks and activities, occupational therapists empower their clients to access personally relevant and valued roles in life. Now, more than ever, occupational therapists are needed in our communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment of unprecedented isolation, uncertainty and inactivity. As people attempt to re-engage, lasting social isolation, loneliness and loss of connections continues to threaten mental health, contributing to an increased risk of mental illness and suicide. Occupational therapists can assist with routines, social connections, and participation in daily life and community – all of which have been severely impacted by physical distancing measures.

Regrettably, the role of occupational therapy in mental health care is currently undervalued by the Tasmanian Government. There is a need for more occupational therapy positions across the state's mental health facilities. Moreover, positions requiring expertise in occupational therapy are too frequently advertised as generalist positions which can be filled by other professions such as psychologists and/or mental health nurses. OTA is also concerned that when an occupational therapist leaves a mental health position it is not always subsequently filled by another occupational therapist.

OTA is also concerned that the expertise of occupational therapists working in mental health is not widely known or understood. This can mean that occupational therapists are forgotten in funding programs in which they could add significant value. For example, while OTA welcomed the Tasmanian Government's recent announcement of additional funding to support the mental health and wellbeing of police officers, it was deeply regrettable that none of this additional funding was made available to mental health occupational therapists.

Given significant shortages across the mental health workforce, it is essential that all suitably qualified and experienced mental health professionals are utilised in any future program or funding scheme.

***Recommendation 5: That the Tasmanian Government invest in an increased number of discipline-specific occupational therapy mental health roles across the THS.***

***Recommendation 6: That the Tasmanian Government ensure that suitably experienced occupational therapists are eligible to participate in all relevant mental health funding schemes and programs.***

## Conclusion

OTA thanks the Department of Treasury for the opportunity to lodge this submission in advance of the 2022-23 State Budget. Please note that representatives of OTA would be pleased to meet with representatives of the Department to expand on any of the matters raised in this submission.

## Appendix 1

Regarding the health and economic impact of preventable falls – and the benefit of occupational therapy assessment and intervention – OTA wishes to share the following excerpt from its recent submission to the National Preventative Health Strategy:

Occupational therapists prescribe assistive equipment and home modifications. These are relatively inexpensive interventions which can significantly reduce the risk of injurious falls.

In 2009 and 2010, one in every 10 days spent in hospital by a person 65 years or older was directly attributable to an injurious fall (AIHW, 2013). The average total length of stay per injurious fall incident was estimated to be 15.5 days (AIHW, 2013). According to one study, these hospitalisations typically incur costs of between \$6,000 and \$18,600 per incident (Watson et al., 2010).

An injurious fall can also be life threatening. Neck of femur (NOF) fractures – the most common kind of hip fracture – are associated with particularly high rates of premature death (AIHW, 2018). According to an Australian study, the mortality rate for patients admitted to hospital with a NOF fracture is 8.1 percent after 30 days and 21.6 percent within one year (Chia et al., 2013).

Even in less severe cases, a fall can impair an older person's long-term mobility and independence, often irreversibly. In such instances, they will require higher levels of assistance to continue living at home and may be forced to enter residential care. This situation is not only detrimental to the individual's quality of life, but also imposes a financial burden on an aged care system that is already failing to meet a growing demand (Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, 2019).

A meta-analysis found that environmental interventions such as simple home modifications can significantly reduce fall risk, especially within high-risk groups

(Clemson et al., 2008). Specifically, researchers observed a 39 percent reduction in falls among high-risk participants and a 21 percent reduction overall (Clemson et al., 2008).

Evidence suggests such that measures are also cost-effective, especially when targeted to specific high-risk groups (Frick et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2017).

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