

Mr Steve Blyth
State President
The Nationals (WA)
PO Box 1418
WEST PERTH WA 6871

By email: steve.blyth@nationalswa.com

4 February 2021

Dear Mr Blyth

Re: 2021 Western Australian State Election

I write to you in your capacity as director of the Western Australian National Party's 2021 state election campaign.

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) is seeking information and undertakings from your party on issues of concern to our members and the communities they serve. OTA is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. More than 3,200 occupational therapists currently work across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in Western Australia.

Occupational therapists are key allied health professionals who work with people and communities to overcome limitations to everyday living caused by such things as injury or illness, psychological or emotional difficulties, developmental delay or the effects of ageing. Occupational therapists work in a diverse range of practice settings including acute hospitals, rehabilitation settings, community and primary health, chronic disease self-management, integrated mental health, education, driver assessment, paediatrics and aged care.

Your response to this correspondence will be made available to our members so that they can make an informed decision at the ballot box on 13 March. Please be assured that similar correspondence with the other major parties contesting the election will also be made available to our members.

Increased number of occupational therapy positions in 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment of unprecedented isolation, uncertainty and inactivity. As communities attempt to re-engage, lasting social isolation, loneliness and loss of connections continue to threaten mental health, contributing to an increased risk of mental illness and suicide. There is clearly a pressing need for more mental health professionals to support these increasing demands and we welcome the State Government's recent commitment of a further \$46.9 million to support suicide prevention programs and initiatives within the community.

Now, more than ever, occupational therapists are needed in our communities.

Regrettably, the role of occupational therapy is currently undervalued by the Western Australian Government. Support is lacking for new mental health occupational therapists entering the profession and existing practitioners are overwhelmed by client demands, with many private occupational therapists reporting they have been forced to stop taking on new referrals. This has been compounded since the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and will continue to be an issue as new reforms amplify demand, increasing administrative cost and time burdens for therapists. The National Disability Services' most recent State of the Disability Sector Report identified problems around the recruitment and retention of occupational therapists in Western Australia, adversely impacting consumers' access to vital supports.

The Western Australian Government has made significant investments in mental health and suicide prevention. To ensure the Government can deliver on these investments, it is critical that significant funding be directed to support frontline mental health professionals. How will an elected Nationals Government invest in professional support and mentorship for mental health occupational therapists, ensuring the ongoing availability of their expertise to those who need it most?

Increased number of occupational therapy positions in schools

Occupational therapists are an integral part of learning and support teams for students with disability and special needs in schools. They bring a unique and specialised perspective to maximising student participation and engagement in a learning environment.

In a classroom setting, occupational therapists recommend, implement and monitor services to support students' participation at school. School-based interventions can include:

- Assisting students to acquire and master the critical skills which underpin participation at school, including social and motor skills, language and emotional regulation;
- Collaborating with educational staff to adapt the social or physical environment to better meet the student's needs; and
- Engaging students in activities relevant to their capabilities to increase feelings of confidence and promote identification with a positive self-identity.

Unfortunately, occupational therapists are currently underutilised in WA schools. Unlike psychologists, occupational therapists are not automatically deployed in schools as part of the statewide support services.

While Education Western Australia employs occupational therapists in schools of special educational needs to support the provision of learning, the present need far outstrips supply.

Many children access supports through private services or other schemes such as the NDIS, however, support of children at school is primarily the responsibility of Education Western Australia. The NDIS funds "therapies a family and school have agreed may be delivered during school time but are not for education purposes," yet in practice, occupational therapists are frequently met with resistance from school principals when seeking to access the school environment.

We ask your party to direct Education WA to work with OTA, to develop guidelines for occupational therapists' access to schools that respects both the learning and privacy of students, and the rights of disability access for children.

If elected, will a Nationals Government ensure that more occupational therapists are employed in WA schools, to reach the 466,469 full time students enrolled in 1,131 schools across Western Australia? (Department of Education, August 2020).

Greater regulation of vehicle modifications

Occupational Therapy Driver Assessors (OTDA) can conduct on- and off-road driving assessments and, where required, prescribe and install vehicle modifications. OTDAs complete specialised post-graduate training, ensuring they are highly qualified to determine medical fitness to drive. OTA members advise that Western Australia currently lacks clear legislation, regulations or guidelines regarding who can prescribe and install vehicle modifications, and under what circumstances. This has prompted the following concerns:

1. Unqualified individuals may be prescribing, trialling and installing vehicle modifications without a completed Driver Licence Medical Form or prior off-road assessment.
2. It is unclear if or how often this occurs without an assessment or prior recommendations from a qualified OTDA.
3. Drivers may not be aware that they could be driving unlicensed and uninsured if the modifications were not prescribed by a qualified assessor and endorsed on their licence.
4. For participants of the NDIS, vehicle modifications should be purchased from the assistive technology budget at level four. This requires an OTDA assessment and endorsement of the modifications on their licence. Participants with self-managed plans have been directed to bypass the OTDA assessment and purchase modifications using their core budget.
5. Funding is unavailable for older drivers requiring a driving assessment who do not meet the criteria for a commonwealth funding source such as the NDIS. The lack of funding creates a barrier to referral pathways from primary healthcare professionals. Accordingly, referrals for assessments based on driving cessation are delayed, potentially risking public safety.
6. The lack of appropriately qualified, regionally based on-road assessors within the Department of Transport creates inefficiencies in time and funding for regional Western Australians.

Will a Nationals Government act to resolve these funding and resource issues and ensure that vehicle modifications are only prescribed by qualified OTDAs following on- and off-road assessment?

To ensure that our members have adequate time to consider the responses of all parties to this correspondence, we ask that your reply reach our office by 4 March 2021.

Should you wish to discuss any of the matters raised in this letter, please contact Erin Clinch, OTA's Western Australian Divisional Manager on 0466159585 or erin.clinch@otaus.com.au.

Thank you in anticipation of your response.

Yours sincerely,



Erin Clinch
Western Australian Divisional Manager



Felicity Beaulieu
Western Australian Divisional Chair