

Department of Social Services

Draft National Autism Strategy

Occupational Therapy Australia submission

May 2024

Introduction

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Draft National Autism Strategy. OTA is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. There are over 30,000 registered occupational therapists working across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in Australia¹. Occupational Therapists are allied health professionals whose role is to enable their clients to engage in meaningful and productive activities.

Occupational therapy role in supporting Autistic people

Occupational therapists play a crucial role in supporting Autistic people across various ages, life roles, and across a range of settings including education, work, health, mental health, justice, and early intervention settings. While the Strategy is silent on the workforces and professions that are key to supporting Autistic people, OTA is keen to ensure the occupational therapy role is understood by government, so that design of strategies, programs, and funding, draws upon and utilises the occupational therapy clinical scope of practice and workforce. Occupational therapists can and should play a key role in supporting specific areas and commitments within the draft National Autism Strategy, which are described below.

Social Inclusion

Occupational therapists play a key role in supporting social inclusion for autistic individuals across several domains. Occupational therapists engage a unique approach to social inclusion by focusing on the dynamic interaction between the person, their environment and the meaningful occupations, activities, or tasks they engage in.

For individuals, occupational therapists work collaboratively to engage their unique strengths, needs and preferences to address sensory differences, differences in social participation, and challenges with task performance and participation to enable them to engage in the activities and social environments that are meaningful to them.

In addition, occupational therapists are highly skilled at facilitating, designing, and modifying environments to support social inclusion and participation. Occupational therapists promote and advocate for universal design principles, neurodiversity affirming practices and attitudes, evidence-based sensory-friendly spaces, environmental adaptation, and engage in capacity building with others to reduce environmental barriers to social inclusion.

Occupational therapists play a valuable role in capacity building for significant people in an Autistic person's life (e.g. educators, employers, families), advocates, and the broader community, leveraging on occupational therapy frameworks and strategies such as coaching and mentoring, to challenge and reduce stigma of autism and promote social inclusion.

There is also a critical role for occupational therapists to assist with important life stage transitions that enable social inclusion in new environments. For example, occupational therapists are ideally placed to support children to transition from early childhood settings into school, and to support older Autistic students to transition from school to further education, day programs, and/or employment. Occupational therapists address barriers, build functional skills, and provide necessary accommodations during important life transitions, including transitioning into funding schemes such as the NDIS.

Occupational Therapy Board (2023)

Economic Inclusion

There is a role for occupational therapists to collaborate with employers to promote inclusive workplaces (during all phases of employment and pre-employment) and to provide support for Autistic people to thrive in their careers, aligning with the Strategy's focus on economic inclusion. Occupational therapists are uniquely skilled in workplace environmental modifications, task analysis and modification, social participation, and sensory accommodations to facilitate workplace accessibility for autistic individuals.

In educational settings (incorporating childcare, pre-schools, primary and high school and tertiary education settings), occupational therapists are a critical resource for educators and school staff to build capacity and understanding of inclusive practices, neurodiversity affirming practice and inclusive learning environments. Occupational therapists provide tiered systems of support across educational settings, by focusing both on the individual level by working directly with autistic students to improve educational participation, as well as working to support groups/cohorts of students. Occupational therapists also work more broadly at a universal design level in these settings (for example supporting whole school programs and accommodations) to promote inclusion for all students.

Diagnosis, Services and Supports

Occupational therapists play a vital role as members of multidisciplinary diagnostic assessment teams, particularly providing input around how a person's sensory, motor, and social differences impact their occupational performance in daily activities and life roles (including at school, work, and leisure), including the impact of the environment on a person's functioning. There is also a role for occupational therapists to support the diagnostic process by providing resources, advocacy and support to Autistic people and their families throughout the process, aiming to reduce barriers, ensure a positive experience, and link individuals with the services and supports they need and choose.

As experts in child development, assessment and differentiation, there is a role for occupational therapists to collaborate with healthcare professionals and educators to facilitate early screening and identification of autism, ensuring timely access to supports and services to maximise long term outcomes.

As key registered allied health professionals, there is a role for occupational therapists to provide early intervention services aimed at supporting autistic children, families and carers, ensuring their timely access to evidence-based supports. Occupational therapists provide early childhood intervention services and supports to individuals, groups and populations.

As integral NDIS providers, anticipated providers of some foundational supports and key facilitators of engagement in mainstream services, there is also role for occupational therapists to promote and facilitate integration between these systems and supports to ensure accessible, individualised, effective, timely, and coordinated service provision for Autistic people.

There is a role for OTA to work with government on the development of a set of standardised co-designed professional development and resource materials to support occupational therapists involved in the identification, assessment and diagnosis of autism. There is also a role for OTA to contribute to a set of best practice resources to support autistic people and their families, carers and support networks through the identification, assessment and diagnosis process.

Research

There is a role for occupational therapy research to contribute to the development of best practices for supporting Autistic people across various life domains, including employment, education, and social participation, contributing to ongoing improvement in service delivery and outcomes. There is also a role for occupational therapists and OTA to contribute to broader research as a key stakeholder in research initiatives focused on improving service systems, policy and quality improvement.

OTA feedback

OTA offers the following feedback to enhance the Draft Strategy through additional recognition of key issues and commitment to enhancing the following areas which will support Autistic people to thrive in Australia.

Economic inclusion

Life Transitions

Occupational therapists are skilled at assisting Autistic people to undergo key transitions in life stages including education, and work. These are critical stages where additional support may be required to identify and address personal and systemic barriers, build functional capacity and skills, and identify and supply any necessary accommodations.

The Strategy should identify life transition points as key area for enhanced support and ensure there is commitment to direct services to these areas to better enable Autistic people's participation in education, employment and other areas of public life.

Diagnosis, Services and Supports

Integration with Compensation schemes

There is a need to recognise that in addition to integration with key supports like health, education, justice, and the NDIS, that Autistic people may also be clients of compensation schemes such as WorkCover or life insurance/income protection schemes. Autistic people may require workers compensation for physical injuries, or mental injuries, which may arise out of inappropriate or absent accommodations provided in their workplace. There is a need to address employment discrimination but also to ensure that safe and inclusive access is supported for Autistic people requiring supports from workers compensation schemes, arising out of employment. The Strategy could include a commitment to work with states and territories to reduce barriers to accessing workers compensation schemes.

Sensory modulation

Emerging research highlights the significance of sensory modulation in supporting Autistic individuals by acknowledging sensory preferences and the impact of sensory experiences on behaviour. Occupational therapists possess unique expertise in comprehensive environmental assessment and the subsequent integration of strategies and interventions including sensory modulation approaches.

The Draft Strategy includes a commitment to increasing sensory-friendly public spaces, however there is no acknowledgement of the importance of evidence-based practice in their implementation. There has been a recent positive trend in the creation of sensory-friendly public spaces including the availability of sensory modulation equipment in such spaces.

While this is positive, environmental and sensory modulation accommodations should be assessed for need, carefully prescribed and safely provided to individuals in their natural

environments to ensure meaningful access, choice, and self-directed participation. OTA recommends the strategy explicitly makes reference to evidence-based provision of environmental and sensory modulation accommodations and that there be reference to a need for further research to develop the evidence base in this area.

Physical supports

Occupational therapists work with Autistic people to address challenges in physical/body aspects when these features are impacting on an individual's performance of tasks or participation in life roles and situations. Physical aspects may include gross and fine motor co-ordination, co-ordination of eye movements, or sensory sensitivities.

These physical impacts can limit functional capacity and need to be assessed and incorporated into the supports and services available to Autistic people to ensure a holistic, person centred approach to supporting achievement of goals and personal wellbeing. These physical impacts often go unnoticed and unmanaged without careful assessment. They can have a significant impact on a person's function, performance and participation, including how they feel about themselves and how they engage with people and activities important to them in life.

The Strategy should acknowledge the physical impacts often experienced by autistic people and include a commitment to ensuring that Autistic people have equitable and timely access to appropriate assessment and supports to address any physical impacts on their activity and participation.

Workforce

The Strategy is silent on the workforce which works alongside Autistic people to provide supports and services. There are currently significant issues in the care and support sector, including workforce shortages for appropriately skilled professionals providing both diagnosis and treatment of autistic people, including occupational therapists who provide therapeutic services inside and outside of the NDIS. Staff shortages and service waitlists for diagnosis and treatment are of significant concern limiting access for autism support services.

Workforce is a significant factor that Government should recognise and address within the strategy, and in connection to other current and upcoming workforce policy developments, including the National Allied Health Workforce strategy which OTA understands is under development. The Strategy should include a specific commitment to address workforce issues to improve timely equitable access to autism services, in both metropolitan, rural and remote areas.

Safety

OTA recommends the creation of a new commitment within the 'Services and Supports' section dedicated to safety of access to services and supports. This should include specific commitment to ensure cultural safety and LGBTQIA+ safety. The Strategy refers to the safety of Autistic people in several places but is silent on any approach that will seek to ensure that supports and services that are supplied to Autistic people are safe and appropriate.

While there are safeguards in the health and NDIS systems, these are not the only ways in which people with autism receive services and safety requires a multi-system approach including informed providers in the following areas:

- Police and justice
- Health and allied health

- Education and training.

Improvement of the safety of Autistic people must be a key commitment for the Strategy, and strategies and supports to achieve this must be included that support appropriate care guidelines, and appropriate training for people providing therapeutic, health and other services to Autistic people.

Contact

For further information or to discuss the contents of this submission, please contact Alex Eather and Alissa Fotiades (job share), General Manager Government and Stakeholder Relations, OTA, via policy@otaus.com.au.