

Australian Capital Territory Budget Consultation 2021-2022

Submission by
Occupational Therapy Australia
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Introduction

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. As at March 2021, there are approximately 400 registered occupational therapists in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), employed in a variety of roles across government, nongovernment, private and community sectors.

Occupational therapists are client-centred health professionals, who use a holistic approach when working with individuals, groups and communities to enhance overall health and wellbeing and engagement in everyday activities of life. Occupational therapists enable people to participate in meaningful and valued activities in their environment whether it be at home, school, work or in the local community. Occupational therapists work in many areas of practice including paediatrics, aged care, disability, physical and mental health, vocational rehabilitation and primary health, as well as emerging areas such as correctional services and refugee resettlement.

OTA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the ACT annual 2021-2022 Budget consultation process. Consultation questions are considered in the response as well as other opportunities within the ACT Government's core areas of responsibility.

Key areas of focus / opportunities

Workforce & Training

In recent years, the demand for occupational therapists has grown with increasing government expenditure in areas such as aged care, health and disability. Whilst this is a positive development, the number of occupational therapists registered in the ACT has not kept up with this growth in demand.

Public and private sector employees are experiencing significant difficulty recruiting occupational therapists in the ACT. A report by the Australian Government Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business (2019) identified a labour shortage of occupational therapists in the ACT, in particular senior therapists. Internet advertised vacancies increased by around 24 percent, with only 40 percent of advertised vacancies filled in 2019. This is impacting on service provision with significant demand on services. Members report lengthy waitlists or non-acceptance of new referrals by some services. In paediatrics, waitlists – especially for autism focused services – have stretched out to 18 months or more with some families seeking input interstate or virtually. Mental health services including drug and adult services also have substantial waitlists.

In 2018, the University of Canberra introduced a new four year undergraduate Bachelor of Occupational Therapy course, in addition to its existing Masters of Occupational Therapy, leading to a gradual increase in the number of graduates this year to approximately 35, double that of previous years. Whilst this increase in supply will assist in helping with demand, it does not go far enough.

Student enrolments in the Occupational Therapy courses at the University of Canberra could be further increased if there was improved access to clinical placements to meet program accreditation requirements. The employment of one fulltime occupational therapist by ACT Health at the Health Hub at the University of Canberra would facilitate the support of clinical placements, enabling up to 14 additional students to be enrolled in occupational therapy courses per year.

Recommendations:

- ***The ACT government fund dedicated Occupational Therapy Clinical Educator(s) at the University of Canberra Health Hub; and***
- ***Strategies to attract and retain occupational therapists in the ACT are pursued by the ACT Government.***

Mental Health

Occupational therapists work with individuals with a variety of mental health conditions from relatively common conditions, such as anxiety and mood disorders, to those which require targeted interventions such as psychosis, eating disorders and trauma-related conditions. Occupational therapists working in mental health assist clients in many ways, including:

- Developing or restoring qualities such as assertiveness, self-awareness and independence;
- Managing stress and emotions in various situations including coping with grief and loss;
- Supporting and enhancing social connectedness and community engagement; and
- Assisting in finding meaningful work, paid or unpaid.

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 and establish goals that consider the roles, circumstances and environments of the individual. Through the prescription of graded tasks and activities, occupational therapists empower their clients to develop personally relevant and valued roles in life.

Now more than ever, with the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing rates of mental health illness and suicide, occupational therapists are needed to support individuals to re-engage in their communities and prevent lasting social isolation, loneliness and loss of connections. The expertise of occupational therapists in mental health is well established and nationally recognised through programs such as the Commonwealth Government's Better Access Initiative.

Unfortunately, the role of occupational therapy in mental health is undervalued by the ACT Government. There is a need for more occupational therapy positions across the Territory's mental health facilities to address current and growing mental health demand.

Recommendation: The ACT Government should ensure occupational therapists are included in all future funding commitments for mental health.

Occupational Therapists in Schools

Occupational therapists' unique focus on 'occupations' and the meaningful participation in everyday activities means that they have an important and valued role to support students at school, especially children with a disability or special needs.

School-based interventions can include:

- Assisting students to acquire and master the critical skills which underpin participation at school, including social and motor skills and emotional regulation;
- Collaborating with educational staff to adapt the social or physical environment to better meet the student's needs;
- Addressing barriers to learning and socialising to maximise participation in the curriculum;

- Engaging students in activities relevant to their capabilities to increase positive feelings of confidence, self-esteem, self-identity and wellbeing; and
- Providing mental health interventions, especially for secondary students including risk assessment, crisis intervention and longer term mental health therapies to help students engage at school.

Regrettably, occupational therapists are undervalued and underutilised in ACT schools. While occupational therapists are represented in the Education Directorate's Network Student Engagement Teams (NSET), they are not automatically deployed to schools like psychologists as part of the student services team. Furthermore, some special schools in the ACT do not have occupational therapists employed within them to support the needs of these children and foster their development and independence.

Additionally, the positive contribution occupational therapists can make to the lives of students with mental health conditions, especially in secondary schools is undervalued. The Youth Mental Health in the ACT report released by the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs in 2020, called for the ACT Government (recommendation 2) to recruit more school psychologists but made no mention of occupational therapists or other suitability qualified health practitioners. In contrast the Victorian Government recently announced its Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary Schools Initiative which will see a psychologist, mental health nurse, social worker or occupational therapist in every state secondary campus by 2022.

Recommendation: The ACT Government commits to increasing the number of occupational therapists employed in schools to support children with disability or special needs, as well as addressing the increasing mental health issues being experienced by young people.

Primary Health Care

A well-established, well-resourced primary health care system with a focus on preventative, wellness and health promotional measures, represents a longer-term investment in the health of the community, takes pressure off the hospital system and shifts emphasis away from reactive spending on the treatment of illness.

Occupational therapists working in primary health provide significant value in supporting individuals and communities in achieving and maintaining a healthier lifestyle. Occupational therapy interventions include:

- Partnering with general practitioners to provide client-focused, goal-orientated care, taking the person, situation and environment into consideration;
- Evaluation of an individual's environment and daily activities, health promotion and lifestyle modification;
- Self-management of chronic conditions including pain, diabetes, respiratory and cardiac illness;
- Home modification, adaptive equipment prescription, activities of daily living retraining and falls prevention measures;
- Early intervention with children and adolescents to improve cognitive, motor, sensory, communication and play skills to enhance development, minimise developmental delay and increase quality of life.

Whilst the Capital Health Network is well established and provides strong support to general practitioners and practice nurses, further work is needed to connect and integrate with allied health. Primary health is a significant area where occupational therapists can provide value with early intervention, health promotion, self-management, mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation: The ACT Government invest in occupational therapists in primary health care settings and teams, thereby increasing the understanding and value they can provide as part of an integrated primary health care team.

Family and Domestic Violence

The unique skillset of occupational therapists means they are well placed to provide support to victims of family and domestic violence through:

- Focusing interventions on rebuilding self-esteem, self-empowerment and self-identity;
- Facilitating ability to participate and engage in meaningful occupations at home, work and in the community;
- Addressing social isolation and promoting positive social interactions and connectedness; and
- Fostering healthy relationships as well as management of stress and emotions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the rates of physical and sexual violence against women, most likely from a combination of economic stress and social isolation. Recent data from the Australian Institute of Criminology indicated that coinciding with the pandemic, close to one in twenty women experienced physical or sexual violence from a cohabiting partner between March and May 2020. Further 53.1% of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence from their current or former cohabiting partner prior to February 2020, reported the frequency or severity increased after COVID-19 lockdown measures were implemented.

Various reports have highlighted the growing issues of family and domestic violence in the ACT including *Now You Have Heard Us. What Will You Do?*, a joint report from the ACT Government and Human Rights Commission and the 2019 Inquiry into Domestic and Family Violence by the Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety.

Recommendation: The ACT Government commit to ensuring occupational therapists are part of the solution in providing victims of family and domestic violence with support.

Aged care

As Australia's population ages, it is imperative that there are well-resourced, accessible and consumer-focused services to meet the needs of older Canberrans both in the community and in residential care facilities.

Occupational therapists work with older people – in hospitals (acute and rehabilitation), the community and in residential care – who are experiencing acute and chronic conditions as well as age-related decline, enabling them to participate in meaningful activities of daily living.

Occupational therapy interventions include:

- Falls prevention, environmental modification and equipment prescription to promote safety and accessibility in the home;

- Therapy intervention and teaching of adaptive strategies to promote independence and prevent functional decline;
- Education and advice to manage age-specific illnesses such as dementia; and
- Fostering social connections and engagement in social and leisure activities.

Whilst OTA acknowledges that the Commonwealth funds residential care and some home-based services for older people, there remains a range of hospital and community services that are the responsibility of the ACT Government. Occupational therapists, with their unique skillset and focus on ‘occupations’, have a key role in supporting older people to remain at home safely and as independently as possible. Members report that due to service demands, older people often have difficulty accessing services such as falls prevention and follow up therapy in a timely manner. Further, services often lack poor coordination and integration.

Recommendation: The ACT Government ensure programs and services for older people in the community are well resourced and funded, including the occupational therapy workforce.

Digital investment

Health data is collected in various systems (electronic and paper) by providers across public and private that do not link with each other; rather, they are siloed within their own systems. This results in poor and untimely sharing of often vital information between health providers, impacting on holistic, informed decision making.

Further, improved data systems that allow ease of data reporting and analysis across sectors is needed to facilitate service evaluation and design.

As outlined in the Health Informatics Society of Australia (HISA) 2019 position statement “*Allied Health Professionals: the untapped potential in digital health*” there are four recommended strategies to support occupational therapists and other allied health professionals to embed and contribute to improvements in digital health data. They are as follows:

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

The Digital Health Record rollout planned for the ACT across all public health services including hospitals, community health centres and walk-in centres is a positive step in addressing current deficits in sharing of vital information between health providers. Linkages with private providers remains a significant gap.

Recommendation: The ACT Government continues to commit significant investment in digital health to facilitate occupational therapists (and other allied health professionals) to embed technology in their practice, thereby improving consumer experience and enabling informed decision making, service evaluation and design.

Consultation questions

1. What are your top three priorities for the COVID-19 economic recovery

OTA strongly advocates for the needs of the most vulnerable to be addressed as a priority as the Territory recovers from the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. Priority areas requiring investment are mental health, family and domestic violence and housing/homelessness. Occupational therapists have an important role to play in all of these areas.

As outlined above, the impacts of COVID-19 on the **mental health** of our community, across all age groups including children, teens, young adults and older people has been significant with increasing rates of mental health illness, anxiety and suicide coupled with the impacts of social isolation and loneliness. A substantial investment in mental health services in the ACT is needed. The core values, expertise and skills of occupational therapists, with their unique focus on the use of 'occupations' to improve wellbeing, address social isolation and reconnect communities means funding must be made available to increase the number of occupational therapists working in mental health services (hospital and community-based) across the Territory.

Increasing rates of **family and domestic violence**, as noted above, have been attributed to the impacts of COVID-19. Occupational therapists have a unique skillset that provides great benefit to those affected by family and domestic violence, including fostering healthy relationships, addressing social isolation and rebuilding self-esteem and self-empowerment. Occupational therapists are frequently not considered as part of the solution in family and domestic violence services. This needs to change so that those most vulnerable can benefit from their expertise and unique skill base.

Access to **affordable and accessible housing** in the ACT is a critical issue that needs addressing. Long waitlists currently exist for public housing and the private rental market is prohibitive for many, especially those with a disability. This can lead to homelessness or individuals living in less than suitable or desirable accommodation. Family and domestic violence and mental illness are often inextricably linked to housing issues due to the increased stress this puts on relationships and the feelings of disempowerment, poor self-worth and loss of connectedness with community.

2. Which ACT Government services do you believe are most important for vulnerable Canberrans?

There are a range of services that need to be better funded to support the needs of the most vulnerable in the ACT community. Occupational therapists have an important role to play in these services. These include:

Paediatric medical and therapy services

Parents in the ACT are experiencing increasing difficulty accessing paediatrician and therapy services for their children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), developmental delay and other conditions. Private and public paediatric occupational therapy services are overwhelmed with waitlists, often 18 months or more, and some services have ceased accepting new referrals. Some children are travelling interstate for services or turning to sessions provided virtually from interstate therapists which are not sustainable for

interventions long-term and impacts coordination and integration of care services. Parents have expressed nervousness in taking a break in therapy sessions for their children, which can at times be beneficial, as they are concerned they will not be able to access services at a later time in a timely manner. The lack of early intervention for children is known to have significant impacts on the family unit and in later life including family breakdown, poor education outcomes, drug abuse and crime.

Mental Health Services for young people

It is imperative that there are accessible mental health services for young people who are experiencing a range of issues, whether it be the effects of trauma, escaping family violence, psychosis, mood disorders or the impacts of COVID-19. Members report difficulty accessing these services for their clients.

Further, the closure of the ACT Recovery College after the initial two year funding finished is a significant loss for the ACT community. The College provided a safe space for the vulnerable in the community to learn about mental health, wellbeing and recovery, offering free educational courses, co-designed by consumers.

Defence and public service community

With significant numbers of defence personnel and Commonwealth public servants living in the ACT, this brings with it unique challenges for their families who have children with developmental delays, disability, special need schooling and mental health conditions. Lengthy waitlists for access to these services makes it incredibly difficult for families who are often required to move frequently for their work.

Non-NDIS eligible

Territorians who are ineligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) are 'falling through the gaps,' with access to services that support their needs proving difficult. For example, an individual who is not clinically blind but is losing their sight does not qualify for NDIS, however, they still need supports to maximise their independence, safety and participation in meaningful activities. The closure of ACT Therapy with the rollout of the NDIS has meant Canberrans deemed ineligible for the NDIS are left with limited access to public services. Private services, meanwhile, tend to be unaffordable and out of reach to the majority.

Drug and Alcohol Services

The current ACT Drug and Alcohol Services are under resourced for the demands experienced. Separate services are not available for various cohorts such as young people and Indigenous Australians. Members report that due to the difficulty in accessing services, some individuals are going interstate to receive the support they need.

Family and domestic violence

As noted above, family and domestic violence is on the rise in the ACT and has been further exacerbated by COVID-19, most likely due to a combination of economic stress and social isolation. Services are overstretched and unable to meet demand. More supports are needed for families as well as respite options. Occupational therapists can make a significant contribution in this area.

Services for the Indigenous community

Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health & Community Services provide a range of general practice and allied health services to the local Indigenous community. Occupational therapists, however, are not employed as part of this service. Employment of occupational therapists would be a valuable addition to the health care team supporting health promotion and wellbeing, community engagement, life skill training, healthy lifestyles and participation in meaningful everyday 'occupations' that fit with their circumstances and environment.

5. How can the ACT Government deliver current services more efficiently to better meet the needs of Canberrans?

Improved integration between service systems, strong leadership and investment in allied health, in particular occupational therapists, will assist in more efficiently delivering services to meet the needs of Canberrans. A focus on improving linkages between public (Territory and Commonwealth) and private health, social and educational services will minimise service duplication, promote seamless service provision and achieve improved coordination of services, especially for those with the most complex needs, whilst improving fairer and more equitable access for all.

Conclusion

OTA thanks the ACT Treasury and Economic Development Directorate for the opportunity to provide a submission as part of the 2021-2022 annual Budget consultation process. OTA would welcome the opportunity to meet to further discuss the points raised in this submission.

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