

Challenges to occupational practice: Future opportunities for occupational therapy

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Introduction: The core philosophy of occupational therapy (OT) embraces a holistic approach based on meaningful and purposeful occupations rather than solely "biomedical problems" of clients. In daily practice, OTs may face challenges in some countries to fully incorporate our core philosophy.

The objective of this presentation is to discuss these challenges and to engage delegates in considering opportunities for change.

Description: Critical reflexivity was used by the authors to uncover the source of challenges. By engaging in this process, we attempted to make our normative frames more explicit while taking larger societal and professional discourses into consideration and challenging ways in which these dimensions shape social meaning and action in professional practice. Our reflexivity is based on our experience of living and practicing as OTs in Austria.

Findings suggest that the Austrian health care system is shaped by an insurance-based system, the predominant use of the medical model, and a strong and well-institutionalised medical profession in a social-partner system. The main focus on disease management and treatment limits space for incorporating a holistic perspective on health. The professional and educational status of allied health professions places these professions including OT in a subordinated position. Furthermore, OT has to overcome additional challenges as a female-dominated profession in a traditional patriarchal culture as evident in Austria.

Conclusion and contribution to occupational therapy: Implementing a holistic health care approach next to improving OT's professional status requires the consideration of how larger societal structures intersect with the profession's situatedness in a given country. A shift from a reductionist paradigm as evident in the medical model to a holistic one which focuses on occupation requires strong commitment of us as professionals and researchers to work towards enacting our philosophy, and to attend to more critical analyses of discourses within the health care system in which we are situated. Next to social values, these discourses are dominated by power and financial resources. OT could facilitate this shift in health care by taking on alternative roles such as engaging actively in political debates about the educational, social, and health care system which would empower our professional status.