

**Skills needed for contemporary occupational therapy practice: New graduates' perspectives**

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The health care environment in Australia provides both opportunities and challenges for educational programmes which prepare occupational therapy graduates for practice. An ageing population, an increased number of people with chronic illness living in the community, improved computer literacy in the general population, organizational structures in health care settings which are commonly programme rather than discipline based, and workforce shortages in allied health are all factors which shape the practice of occupational therapy in Australia and occupational therapy education.

The objective of this paper is to examine the perspectives of new graduate occupational therapists regarding current knowledge, skills and attitudes required for practice and to consider the implications for professional preparation programmes.

Using a sequential, exploratory qualitative research design, in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with eight new graduates (up to 2 years post graduation) who were employed in either long standing or role emerging settings

Graduates reported that, as well as occupational therapy skills they needed high level professional skills in communication, time management, self management and the need for flexibility and adaptability. Of concern however, was the view that a strong theoretical base to inform practice was not needed. They believed that other professionals would "not understand" them, and that it was the day-to-day experiences, rather than an understanding of occupational therapy theory, that shaped their practice. The need for new graduates to feel that they "fitted in" to the workplace and experience a sense of belonging to the organisation was widely shared.

The discipline of occupational therapy is defined by its unique knowledge of the relationship between health, wellbeing and occupation and the use of occupation as both an ends and a means in the therapeutic process. It is important for occupational therapists to maintain a strong sense of the knowledge base of the discipline and to enact the core assumptions of the profession in their everyday practice. Some strategies which aim to strengthen the new graduate's capacity to 'hold on' to theoretical knowledge despite the pressure to conform to the workplace will be proposed.