

Graduate perspectives on occupational therapy in primary health - directions for the future.

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Occupational therapy has noted significant changes in its models of practice, locations of practice, client diagnoses, and the focal point of occupation within intervention. Research based in New Zealand reviewed changes in the profession over time using organisational theory as the lens. A model was developed within which four stages of role differentiation were described (Wilson, 2004). These four stages go from role blindness, where members of the profession just do not see the possibilities, through to role respect where the role and its associated expertise is understood valued and appreciated. Changes within a profession do not occur in isolation rather they are influenced by shifts in society. The health industry has and is undergoing change with greater attention given to primary health. There is a clear need for current and future health professions to learn how to work in more trans-disciplinary and collaborative ways building capacity within communities to effectively address health issues.

Preparing students for future roles requires developing work integrated learning opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills to achieve 'role respect'. If we aspire to have an occupational focus within emerging health work paradigms our graduates need to be able to work effectively within the primary health domain integrating the importance and language of occupation.

Several occupational therapy programs in Australia and New Zealand have implemented work integrated project placements where students seek to address an identified issue within an agency in a collaborative and sustainable manner. However, to date there is no data evaluating graduate perceptions of such experiences. An online survey of 2008 Australian and New Zealand graduates was undertaken in mid 2009 to determine the number of graduates who had been exposed to such learning opportunities and the degree to which such experiences influenced understandings of their current and future practice. The findings of the study will provide useful data for the profession in determining potential learning opportunities (for undergraduate students) that assist the development of occupational contributions to primary health.

Reference: Wilson, L. (2004). Role differentiation in a professionalising occupation: the case of occupational therapy, New Zealand. University of Otago, Dunedin.