

From convicts to community action: tracing stories of mental health and occupation

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Introduction

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists has passed its fifty year milestone. Some member countries will soon prepare centenary celebrations, while others proudly reach much younger 'birthdays'. Within our rich collections of historical stories we have opportunities for analysis of historical development and professional practice knowledge. This paper aims to present a critique of mental health practice, examining early philosophies regarding occupation and mental health, using the example of developments in Australia and early 20th Century international links.

Objectives

The study aims to identify and analyse historical, philosophical and political factors influencing development of practice knowledge in occupational therapy. Its purpose is to develop deeper understanding of connections and tensions between theoretical perspectives, as outlined in literature, and practice, as described by practitioners.

Methods

The research is situated within an interpretive paradigm, using hermeneutic analysis. Data sources include health service records, professional association archives, research studies and occupational therapy reference books. A series of 'critical professional conversations' with occupational therapists reviews findings through interview and small group discussions.

Results

Findings situate early mental health services in Australia within the unique background of convict settlements. Occupational therapy appeared long after convict ships, yet early occupational therapists worked within institutional environments that echoed past practices. Fostered by the medical model and their own international links, they fought against prevailing institutional codes. Through subsequent decades however, occupational therapists describe an 'embarrassment' with some of their approaches to practice, resulting in dilemmas for practice, further challenged by community based and multidisciplinary environments.

Conclusion

Despite strengthening of occupation focussed theory, it is possible to identify lost ground and gaps in the knowledge base of practice. A question also emerges as to how we balance ongoing development of new models of practice, while consolidating those of our past.

Contribution to practice

Deeper understanding of practice knowledge, developed in the context of historical and philosophical backgrounds, will strengthen professional confidence to face future challenges. This paper links lessons of history to current initiatives by WFOT in developing a position statement on mental health and efforts to be politically astute in tackling issues of occupation in communities.