

The relevance and application of virtue ethics within occupational therapy practice

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Introduction: Originating in Ancient Greece, in particular the work of Aristotle, virtue ethics (VE) is one of three core ethical approaches today. VE emphasises character, practical wisdom and human flourishing, in contrast to rules and duties (deontology) and consequences of actions (consequentialism). Synergies exist between VE and the overall philosophy of occupational therapy, with an emphasis on client-centered practice, holism and improving quality of life. Yet reference to VE remains largely absent within the occupational therapy literature.

Objectives: The aims of this presentation are twofold: First, to describe how the discipline of ethics, in particular VE, may contribute to the professional and personal development of occupational therapists. Second, to introduce the concept of VE as a reflective practice tool for occupational therapists that also supports and enriches the philosophical foundations of the profession.

Description: The relevance and implications of VE for occupational therapy will be examined by drawing upon the work of several key virtue ethicists, codes of professional ethics and core philosophies guiding occupational therapists.

Discussion: VE presents a way of living a good life in order to flourish as a human being, a goal which extends beyond the individual to the flourishing of communities and which is shared by the vision of occupational therapy. At the core of values guiding occupational therapists, as evident within various codes of professional ethics, are virtues such as tolerance, loyalty and honesty. Such codes of ethics also contain other elements key to VE, including the need to exercise practical wisdom in everyday practice.

Conclusion: For some practitioners and academics, the topic of VE may seem distant from the practical realities of occupational therapy. Yet with an emphasis on character, practical reasoning and human flourishing, VE is about the practical realities of life and consequently cannot be ignored or overlooked.

Contribution to the practice / evidence base of occupational therapy: Adopting a VE framework has many potential benefits for occupational therapy practice such as looking beyond taken-for-granted assumptions in health care, personal and professional development of therapists, and practice development more broadly in the profession.