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Determining the research priorities for the profession of occupational therapy in South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Occupational Therapy is a profession that focuses on enhancing the functioning of individuals who experience functional limitations particularly when engaging in occupation related activities. The setting of research priorities is seen as an important activity for every organisation¹. The Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA) wanted to understand the current occupational therapy research focus areas in South Africa and possibly develop recommendations for occupational therapy priority research areas for the future.

METHOD

The scientific investigation was conducted in two phases, namely, a quantitative descriptive research design was used in **phase one** of the study and **phase two** used a qualitative research design. The aim of phase one of the study was to determine the views of occupational therapists about the research priority focus areas for the profession of occupational therapy in South Africa. Phase two of the study was to analyse a shared university database in order to describe the main research areas in which occupational therapists conducted research for the period 2017 to 2019.

During **phase one** of the study the researcher conducted a survey with all 3304 occupational therapists registered with the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA) at the time of the study. However only 97 individuals completed the survey that focused on what the research priorities. The questionnaire used in the current study was adapted from the WHO research priority questionnaire, it was used to identify research priorities for the occupational therapy profession¹.

In **phase two** of the project the researchers utilised content analysis in order to analyse a research database linked to all 8 universities in South Africa. The research database consists of all published research and unpublished research (degree and non-degree purposes) that have been documented by the 8 universities who offer occupational therapy training programmes in South Africa. The Framework for Disability Strategy and Rehabilitation² was used as a theoretical framework in the current scientific enquiry. Further content analysis allowed the researchers to analyse written content and to highlight common areas of significance. The study obtained ethics clearance from the University of the Western Cape, the ethics approval number for the project being HS20/3/1

RESULTS

The results of phase one of the study indicated that the following research focus areas were regarded as areas of priority for future research: effectiveness of occupational therapy intervention, evidence-based occupational therapy practice and the development of valid and reliable occupational therapy measurement tools. The results of phase two of the study indicated that Occupational Therapy Education and training-based research and Mental Health Disorders (including substance abuse) were the most common areas of occupational therapy research in South Africa (Table I page 7).

CONCLUSION

The research evidence-based hierarchy as described by Miller & Forest³ describes research evidence according to 5 levels of quality of evidence. Research at Level 1 is regarded as the highest or strongest level of research evidence, this level is described by studies such as systematic reviews (meta-analysis) and randomised control trials. Research at Level 4 to 5 being regarded as the weakest level of evidence, this level is described by studies that uses case reports or case series and narrative reviews to answer the research questions linked to the study³. The results of the current study

Table 1: Results of Phase one and Phase two of the study

PHASE ONE (Areas of research priority based on survey results as a %)	PHASE TWO (Dominant research focus areas identified from universities in South Africa's research database as a %)	RESEARCH PRIORITY NEEDS (Needs identified according to the Disability and Rehabilitation Framework)
Effectiveness of Occupational Therapy Intervention [74%]	Occupational Therapy Education and training-based research [58%]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearing loss in children • Neural tube defects and Spina bifida • Neurodevelopmental disorders • Non-communicable diseases • Tuberculosis • Visual and Hearing impairments in adults.
Evidence-based Occupational Therapy Practice [67%]	Mental Health Disorders (including substance abuse) [49%]	
Development of Valid and Reliable Occupational Therapy Measurement tools [57%]	Participation: Leisure pursuits and driving [32%]	

indicate that there were minimal occupational therapy related studies conducted between the years 2017- 2019 that are regarded as research evidence at level 1. With the majority of occupational therapy related research being regarded as research evidence at level 4 to 5. In conclusion the results of the study suggested a need to conduct Level 1 studies that require evidence-based occupational therapy practice. Furthermore, there is a need to conduct research that relates to the focus areas identified by the Framework for Disability Strategy and Rehabilitation.

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Recommendations and Implications for practice

Departmental research committees develop Think Tanks together with clinicians, communities and faculty in order to plan research that focus on the priority research areas identified in this study.

Emphasis be placed on developing the research methods skills of undergraduate students, post graduate students, clinicians and academic skills particularly in designing Level 1A and Level 1B research studies.

Research funding and awards be prioritised for Level 1A and Level 1B type of research in Occupational Therapy.

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