

Research in Occupational Practice

A major component of my day to day work as a lecturer involves the teaching of research methods at all levels of training (first year to doctoral level) and across many professions (registered for programmes in Public Health, Rehabilitation and Disability Studies). Ongoing review of the content offered in these courses involve, on one hand, a consideration of content to include and, on the other hand, the exit-level competencies. The pertinent question here is on the scope of occupational therapy research and the knowledge and skills required by occupational therapy researchers for them to contribute confidently and competently in their chosen fields of interest. My experience has been that occupational therapists require broad research knowledge and a full range of skills in order to answer the varied research questions our profession has to answer in order produce the evidence that will be needed for our profession to thrive in a new legislative environment in which all health intervention increasingly will have to produce demonstrated outcomes. Several factors that are valued in our profession call for researchers with sophisticated knowledge and skill that will allow them to match/critique the goodness of fit between methodology and research question. These factors include:

- ❖ the complexities associated with understanding occupation (in context) and the meaning/fit of improving health,
- ❖ the lived experience of 'doing' as influenced by personal, cultural and environmental realities,
- ❖ the broad range of techniques used, for which evidence is required,
- ❖ the extent to which our practice is shaped by influences emanating across system levels (from human to societal level),
- ❖ implications of holistic practice and
- ❖ our commitment to client-centred practice and community-led processes.

The question that comes to mind is the minimum requirements needed for effective practice given the complexities associated with occupational therapy practice. To answer this question two (rather obvious) factors require consideration; (1) the exit-level competencies of novice researchers when they enter the field. I hold the view that occupational therapy researchers should, at the very least, be able to judge research coherence (alignment between the ontology, epistemology and methodology) and appraisal of the fit between the research question and the methodology used. Because these competencies are required when producing findings (research evidence) and consuming (reading, applying, disseminating) research it becomes clear that every practitioner should at least meet expected research competence. To achieve of such competence

I would argue that, for occupational therapists to judge their own knowledge and skill as adequate they would need to be able to do this for the range of methodologies presented in publications in the field. At a postgraduate level a student needs to comprehend the full landscape of research, including different paradigms (qualitative and quantitative), orientations (e.g. positivist, interpretivist, post-modern), and traditions (e.g. ethnography, phenomenology, life history work). My experience has been that researchers' own appraisal of their research knowledge and skills strongly influence the confidence level of researchers and reviewers.

It is with consideration of the above argument for occupational therapy researchers to engage in research drawing on the full landscape of research that I found the studies presented in this Special Edition South African Journal of Occupational Therapy so encouraging and exciting. The diversity of research contained in it begins to demonstrate the breadth and depth of knowledge and skill on which researchers drew to conduct their research. Similarly, the scope covered by researchers disseminating their findings in this Edition is worth noting. The variation in authors' level of experience (for research and publication) – from final year occupational therapy students to seasoned authors - is also noteworthy. Further variation is demonstrated in research sites that include schools, community sites, university contexts and rehabilitation units ranging from one-on-one direct intervention to modification/adaptation of environment right through to policy development. The lessons to take away from this realisation are that research should be an integral part of day-to-day occupational therapy practice and that publication can be a natural extension. The profession can no longer afford a culture in which a small group of researchers engage in research for personal development or out of interest; the need for empirically produced evidence will play an increasingly larger role in the funding, shape and size of the occupational therapy profession in future.

As guest editor of this edition it is my hope that you, the reader, will enjoy the research produced and presented here by authors with an affiliation to the Stellenbosch Occupational Therapy Division. The Stellenbosch Division embarked on a serious drive to improve research output and make a positive and relevant contribution to the ongoing development of occupational therapy in South Africa; it recognises and salutes similar initiatives at other institutions and across practice contexts.

Lana van Niekerk
Guest Editor

Rooted in the past, positioned for the future

During the period 1956 to 1973, the Faculty of Medicine was located at Karl Bremer Hospital where training of all the health professions, including occupational therapy, took place. Thereafter, in 1974, it was relocated to the Tygerberg Campus. The faculty was renamed in 2001 to the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS). In 2006 restructuring of the FHS culminated in the grouping of all 'Allied Health Science' Departments together with six others to establish the Department of Interdisciplinary Health Sciences (DIHS) comprising nine Divisions (which previously functioned as Departments). This reorganisation presented the opportunity for the Occupational Therapy Division to become a significant role player in the DIHS by utilising opportunities offered. Our positioning within the DIHS offers possibilities that are of benefit to the Occupational Therapy Division and beyond.

In July 2011, the celebration of the first fifty years of the training of occupational therapists at the Stellenbosch University, took place. This occasion was organised in the form of a colloquium attended

by both past and present alumni and lecturers. All participants and presenters had the opportunity to reflect on the past and communicate what possibilities they envisioned the future could hold for occupational therapy.

The programme of the colloquium provided the us with an overview of the contributions that occupational therapists with links to the SU Division of Occupational Therapy, have made and continue to make to the development of the profession. At the same time, it underlined the opportunities and challenges we face as a profession. Trends that affect the practice of occupational therapy on an international and national level were also addressed. It became clear how much the fields of occupational therapy practice have changed and expanded over time to include promotion and prevention programmes in all sectors. The challenge for occupational therapists is to position themselves and the profession from an occupational performance perspective and in line with what can be identified as basic services by administrators and other health



professions. The tendency in terms of financing health services in the public sector has been to earmark finances for provision of basic health services and personnel costs at low remuneration levels to make the service affordable. The Canadian Occupational Therapy Association proposes that to counteract this trend and to be recognised as a necessary role player in service delivery: "Occupational therapists need to capitalize on strengths, use strong marketing strategies and become involved in restructuring activities, to ensure that occupational therapy is able to benefit from these new opportunities while at the same time remaining an essential service in reconfigured health care."¹

The colloquium demonstrated that the quality, novelty and variation of occupational therapy practice in South Africa is in line with the abovementioned statement. Occupational science provides the scientific foundation for occupational therapists on which they base their motivation and reasoning for expanded service delivery. Although topics varied from highly specialised services in tertiary environments, to involvement in basic services in rural areas, the golden thread of occupation was the focus of all inputs. This emphasises the following statement by Van Niekerk:

"One of the most immediate consequences of occupational science is a renewed concern with the use of natural occupations. The understanding and use of natural occupations within naturalistic contexts, as differentiated from constructed occupations that are used within institutional contexts, is increasingly the focus of occupational therapists"^{2: 63}.

Presentations at the colloquium indicated growth in research in the profession, but more importantly it highlighted the enlarged

scope for research due to the fact that occupational therapy has moved far beyond interventions with disease and trauma and the boundaries of facilities. Presentations revealed how practitioners can shape their contributions in any situation due to their understanding of the concepts 'human occupation' and 'occupational engagement' as core components for health. The necessity of research required to produce evidence to cement occupational therapy's specific contribution in the attainment of health of individuals, groups and populations.

Research is just one of the main focus areas in the DIHS and various options are created in the Department for interprofessional collaborative research, funding and support programmes, for example a pre-doctorate programme to enhance the experience of PhD candidates.

The Stellenbosch Division of Occupational Therapy is in the right place at the right time to position itself as a strong future ally within the DIHS and within the profession - we look forward to a collaborative journey.

References:

1. Von Zweck C. Occupational Therapy NOW 2004;6(2):31/10/2011 Available from: <http://www.caot.ca/default.asp?pageid=1094>.
2. Crouch R, Alers V. Occupational therapy in psychiatry and mental health. 4th ed. London: Whurr; 2005.

Susan Beukes

Head: Division Occupational Therapy [May 1988 to present]

Congratulations to the Occupational Therapy Division University of Stellenbosch

On this their 50th Anniversary

From the

The editorial Committee of the South African Journal of Occupational Therapy

