

Occupational Justice

An Effort to Diminish Occupational Injustice

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The formation and history of a World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT) sanctioned program, the Occupational Therapy International Outreach Network (OTION), that connects occupational therapists worldwide, will be discussed as a way to diminish occupational injustice. The focus will be on how occupational therapists and students from the United States can become involved and how the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) can assist with these efforts. Different volunteer opportunities available to occupational therapists and students will be explored through personal testimonies. These stories include examples of interventions, rewarding and challenging experiences, advice for international work, and what motivated interviewed individuals to travel to countries such as Haiti, Zambia, Romania, Laos, and Malawi. As occupational therapists from the United States begin to use OTION and collaborate internationally, professional isolation and occupational injustice can be addressed.

Volunteer and service work can make an impact on the world. It can be implemented at many different levels, from organizing a local toy drive to collecting donations for national relief efforts. People should volunteer in international efforts; the field of occupational therapy has recognized this duty by exploring international volunteer opportunities for occupational therapists. The development of the Occupational Therapy International Outreach Network (OTION), which is sanctioned by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists, has made strides in promoting volunteerism and overcoming occupational injustice. Occupational therapy is a field with unique skills and caring individuals who can volunteer and make contributions to the greater global society.

The small actions of an individual can grow into a social revolution. Anne Frank summarized how actions fueled by the spirit of change can expand to impact the world:

How lovely to think that no one need wait a moment, that we can start now, start slowly changing the world! How lovely that everyone, great and small, can make their contribution toward introducing justice straightaway. And you can always, always give something, even if it is only kindness (Aspel, 1999, 8).

The Establishment of the Occupational Therapy International Outreach Network

In April 1999, at the Occupational Therapy Australia National Conference, a group of occupational therapy students and practitioners from Australia proposed a progressive idea to form an organization that would further international volunteer efforts. Each of the organizations founders had worked in various countries such as Samoa, India, Bangladesh, and Cambodia (Newton & Fuller, 2005). Elise Newton, an occupational therapist, is accredited with playing a large role in the formation of the Occupational Therapy International Outreach Network (OTION). OTION now consists of over 1,600 occupational therapists and students with more than 120 connections to different countries (Newton & Fuller, 2005, p. 361).

As described on the official website, "...they saw a need to foster communication between occupational therapists interested and involved in working in under-resourced countries. They wanted to promote great awareness of the needs and opportunities in this area among the wider occupational therapy profession" (World Federation, 2004, 2). The major issues driving the formation of OTION were a need for communication, networking, and access to information for those therapists working in professional isolation, especially in countries with a scarcity of healthcare resources (Newton & Fuller, 2005).

The World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT) demonstrated its support in May of 2000, by agreeing to fund the OTION website as well as to include it in the International Cooperation Program (Newton & Fuller, 2005). OTION was presented at the WFOT World Congress held in Sweden in 2002. The website has evolved and now allows people the opportunity to register online, participate in discussion boards, and network with therapists from all over the world. Practitioners can share their experience and knowledge about specific practice areas. The website allows collaboration with colleagues from different countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, Japan, Brazil, and Australia. The collaboration is beneficial, especially to therapists with very limited resources. The website is also valuable to students or therapists who wish to volunteer in another country. Through OTION, therapists can

learn about different opportunities and communicate directly with someone who is in a certain country and who can describe the need most vividly.

OTION updates its services to be consistent with the evolving world. It continues to develop relationships with WFOT as a sponsor, increase leadership ability, and connect with various organizations including volunteer, government, and disability related groups (Newton & Fuller, 2005). OTION has a large focus on occupational justice within underserved populations. Occupational justice is sought by occupational therapists to remediate disparities experienced by specific populations. Occupational injustice occurs "...when participation in occupations is barred, confined, restricted, segregated, prohibited, underdeveloped, disrupted, alienated, marginalized, exploited, excluded, or otherwise restricted," (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2005, p. 66).

The people who most often experience occupational injustice are people who are refugees, poor, ill, or imprisoned. Occupational therapists work to engage people so that they may participate in occupations. Occupations include any activity that provides meaning and purpose. Occupations occur in contexts that are cultural, temporal, spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional. Examples of occupations are self care activities, work and education, and leisure and play. People experiencing occupational injustice need assistance from practitioners to advocate for their individual rights and influence policy making. Initiatives to eliminate occupational injustice are related to efforts that diminish professional isolation. Finally, building a framework for service in under-resourced countries will assist in overcoming occupational injustice. Under-resourced countries are often faced with poverty and have a lack of resources including healthcare providers, government assistance, and employment opportunities (Newton & Fuller, 2005). In addition, under-resourced countries are often subject to political upheaval, war and unrest. Occupational therapists who work in remote areas need support to overcome professional isolation and to promote occupational justice (Newton & Fuller, 2005).

International Needs

Individuals may have many benefits that they are not aware of and might take for granted. For example, the life expectancy for a male born in the United States is 75 years (WHO,

2004). The life expectancy for a male born in Uganda is 48 years (WHO, 2004). In the United States 46 out of 100,000 people will die from injuries (WHO, 2002); in Hungary this number is 67 out of 100,000 (WHO, 2002). Information about other countries around the world is readily available with the click of a mouse. News stories flash daily about global discrepancies. Humans are no longer isolated from global information, and it can make them aware of occupational injustice. With increasing globalization and relations among nations, the actions of one will impact many. Occupational therapy services are not readily available in most developing nations. Many occupational therapists know this and want to take action. There is a professional and personal responsibility to health care.

Personal Testimonies

Some inspiring information came from a physical therapist (personal communication, September 23, 2006) contacted through the OTION database. He said that the website is better than any collaborative efforts for international communication and networking in the physical therapy world. The physical therapist is from Canada and has worked as a volunteer in South America, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Southeast Asia, Southern Africa, and has recently spent over a year in Haiti. He noted that, through these experiences, people develop a respect for others and an awareness of many issues that are related to problems in industrialized countries.

When asked about funding, the therapist reported that he fulfilled his financial needs through fund-raising and paying out-of-pocket. One of his longer trips to Haiti was funded by a Canadian non-governmental organization (NGO); this is an option for people who cannot afford to use personal money. An NGO is a non-profit organization that is apolitical and funded privately, internationally, or in combination with the government (Nelson, 2004). Volunteers who opt to serve under a large organization may receive assistance in fundraising.

In one of the physical therapist's current projects, he is serving as a consultant for a rehabilitation aide training program in Haiti. He exclaimed that they cannot get enough occupational therapy volunteers (personal communication, September 23, 2006). There is a great need for them and the minimal amount of volunteers cannot deliver enough care. When asked

what his most rewarding experience was, he responded “[s]eeing former students who had huge difficulties with their studies develop into brilliant practitioners,” (personal communication, September 23, 2006). This is very encouraging for students who want to volunteer abroad.

The therapist offers some advice and information about challenges that may occur internationally. The skills that he believes are useful include: (a) learning languages of host countries, (b) having patience, (c) making observations and adaptations to the culture and way of life, and (d) analyzing information on many levels from different perspectives (personal communication, September 23, 2006). Clinical skills become secondary. If a therapist cannot communicate, adapt to the culture, learn from people, or analyze situations, he will not be able to work with people. A therapist must also consider governmental and societal barriers that are a part of the country being served. For example, in many countries there is often a lack of resources and a greater stigmatism of people with disabilities. For outsiders to the society, like visiting therapists, this is a complex circumstance. Many therapists learn to cope with these societal challenges by accepting them and working around them. The physical therapist suggests learning about the area and accepting that there may not be great changes in the society or the individual people. It takes many years to see some effects, so learning and listening are vital components to an international experience (personal communication, September 23, 2006).

When asked for one important piece of advice to give to an occupational therapist (OT) wanting to volunteer internationally, an occupational therapist contacted through OTION responded with “...go with a reputable organisation first and for most to provide you support (training prior and support whilst abroad, this is essential!) Don't be tempted to just link up with a small local organisation and go out alone, unless you have extensive clinical experience. Or there is an OT to supervise your practice! I can't emphasize this more... It might be difficult to get in but if you are patient and willing to get clinical experience in the USA first, then go overseas, this is best” (personal communication, September 22, 2006).

The occupational therapist providing the advice above is from the United Kingdom. She volunteered overseas through the British volunteer program, Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO). She recommends it as a “great organisation” that provided training beforehand. The VSO is

currently looking for occupational therapists as volunteers. While based in the United Kingdom, they have an office in Canada that recruits in the United States.

Finally, a third therapist, an occupational therapist in the United States, said she would like to raise the awareness of volunteering among practitioners and students. She volunteered with her husband, who is a physical therapist, in Peru, India, and Cameroon, through her own funding and a grant. She identified knowledge in psychosocial issues, task analysis, and community based services as the most valuable training for service abroad (personal communication, October 19, 2006). The occupational therapist indicated it is important to leave instructions for client caregivers and future volunteers in order to make a sustainable impact. She learned how culture affects the dynamics of therapy, and she feels that she gained knowledge about her own culture that can strengthen interactions with others. Her advice is to “Just do it!” (personal communication, October 19, 2006). The therapist also suggested exploring programs within religious organizations. For example, many churches sponsor mission trips; a therapist could serve on the trip by utilizing skills unique to his or her occupational therapy training.

Take Action

There are many different volunteer programs available for people interested in serving abroad. The book *Alternatives to the Peace Corps* edited by Willsea (2003) has many examples listed. Programs that are based in the United States include Doctors for Global Health and Peacework. As health care professionals we have a duty to promote healthy lifestyles and aid in the prevention of disease. Many people may say they ought to be doing something, but now it is time to take action.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) does not currently have a program for international volunteering. In response to a request for more information about international volunteer options, a representative from AOTA responded with “several academic programs...have set up programs for their students to volunteer in other countries” (personal communication, September 20, 2006). For example, Creighton University has held student programs in the Dominican Republic. They collaborate with Dominican therapists to learn from

one another in different service sites. The students learn how culture and society affects treatment and outcomes. There is an international program at Tufts University (2007) that allows the occupational therapy students to complete a semester abroad in Scotland, England, or Sweden. The University at Buffalo (2006) also offers a study abroad program for occupational therapy students. The students can visit hospitals, clinics, and rehabilitation programs in Brazil or they can host students from Brazil who are studying at the university. The representative from AOTA also recommended posting an interest in international work on the AOTA listserv and joining WFOT.

Discussion

There is a viable need for occupational therapists in the United States to form an international volunteer program. Occupational therapy has both the quantity and quality of professionals to serve the global community and work for occupational justice. Dagger (2005) offers multiple reasons a person might be compelled to volunteer, or serve others. They include addressing society's unmet needs, remedying social inequities, and cultivating public service (Dagger, 2005). "Life is often hard, and its hardships and hard work do not fall equally on everyone...civic service [is] a remedy for social inequities that consign some to lives of ease and others to dangerous, debilitating, or dirty work" (Dagger, 2005, p.17).

One way to expand the profession's knowledge and begin international efforts is to use the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) introduced by the World Health Organization (WHO). The ICF provides outcome measures and demonstrates the relationship among environment, impairments, activities, and participation (Law, 2002). The ICF can be used as an international tool and a means for universal communication. A universal language will expand the effectiveness of evidence-based practice (EBP) by incorporating the knowledge base from multiple countries. This will allow therapists to transfer their skills from one country to another and increase collaboration with other therapists. Occupational therapists should be inspired by organizations like OTION and the grassroots initiative that led to its formation. There are many benefits from volunteering internationally. It promotes cultural understanding, professional growth, and collaboration with our global peers while meeting the needs of others.

International volunteerism is a potentially valuable option for students and recent graduates. The experience that can be gained and the chance to explore a new culture are particularly appealing. There should be incentives for students and new graduates to volunteer such as loan forgiveness, income tax deductibles, or an increase in available federal grants. Another option would be for a student to complete a Level II fieldwork experience abroad. Students would need to find a WFOT approved therapist and follow the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy (ACOTE) standards (“Frequently Asked Questions About Working and Studying in the USA”, 2006)

Plunging into the topic of international volunteering as an occupational therapist led to many questions. Why is there not an international volunteer program for occupational therapists in the United States? Is it simply because one has not been formed? A grassroots initiative, a small group of devoted therapists, may be the approach to begin an international program.

How many occupational therapists from the United States are currently volunteering internationally? It would be useful to collect information about American occupational therapists volunteering abroad; it is very pertinent to professional development in terms of experience and knowledge acquisition. It is important to know what volunteer programs occupational therapists have participated in, how they have been received, and in what areas they are most adequate to serve. AOTA, as a national professional association, needs to address these questions in order to assist therapists who wish to serve internationally. As a possible solution, AOTA can include an international experience link on its official website to read stories from therapists who have volunteered. The AOTA membership application can recognize therapists who have volunteered internationally by allowing them to identify themselves with “yes, I have served internationally,” “no, I have not served internationally.” For those that respond that they have served internationally, AOTA can ask them to submit a story and advice for international volunteering that can be posted on the website. Membership applications for national organizations, such as AOTA, can include a checkbox for therapists to indicate that they are interested in receiving information about international volunteerism.

Occupational therapists can start promoting international volunteerism now by registering with OTION and contacting therapists in other countries to learn about current efforts. The core values and attitudes of occupational therapy, such as publicized in AOTA's Code of Ethics, include altruism, equality, dignity, and justice. These concepts support international service by expressing the need for therapists to have an unselfish concern for others welfare, allow everyone to have similar human rights and opportunities, recognize the inherent worth of each person, and provide occupational therapy to all individuals who are in need (Slater, 2006). The principle of beneficence applies as it states, "Occupational therapy personnel are to demonstrate a concern for the safety and well-being of the recipients of their services" (Slater, 2006, p. 6). They are responsible for promoting public health and the well-being of communities and also for individuals to obtain needed services.

Conclusion

Each person has the power to make a difference. Readers can take small steps towards international volunteering by beginning with volunteering in their own communities and state. It is important not to underestimate the power of grassroots initiatives, as evidenced by Elise Newton and OTION. A group of people saw a need and took action; they were not complacent. These efforts can evolve into world-wide strength. As occupational therapists begin to use OTION and collaborate internationally, professional isolation and occupational injustice can be addressed. The profession will have advanced knowledge in various societal and governmental issues. This will bring occupational therapy to a new level with many other professions. The act of volunteering, especially in underserved populations, can make positive changes throughout the world.

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