

The Role of Occupational Therapy in Alberta's Health Care System

Occupational therapy (OT) offers a distinct approach to strategic solutions in the promotion of health and wellness that can result in both cost savings and a better quality of care for Alberta's most vulnerable citizens.

By breaking down the barriers which impede individuals in their everyday activities, occupational therapists (OTs) examine not only the physical effects of an injury or disease, but also address the psycho-social, community and environmental factors that influence function capacity for effective community living.

OTs work to bridge the gap from medical interventions to rehabilitation through practical therapeutic interventions. They create dramatic results designed to improve a person's self-management capacity – there is no other profession as function-based, eclectic or transdisciplinary in client care.

Occupational therapists help people across their lifespan participate in things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities, and how they occupy their time (occupations). OTs are well positioned with their background in anatomy, neurology, and psychiatry to address failure to thrive issues.


Strategic implementation of approaches to functional intervention creates the next step after medical and acute rehabilitation care by expertly moving “stuck” disability conditions towards participation and engagement in everyday living by intervening with uniquely designed strategies and therapeutic approaches.

Focused interventions promote engagement and participation in occupations, activities and roles expected of a person, and finds ways for the person to revise activity demands and contexts to support successful and effective living within the community.

OT aims to include: restoring, remediating or maintaining performance skills; teaching new methods or compensatory strategies through practice opportunities within customary environments; and promoting new performance patterns, life styles or ways of living through educational processes.

Occupational therapists work directly with clients to teach skills necessary to return to daily life activities that are purposeful, meaningful and important to the individual, family members, community and society.

OT also recognizes that everyday occupational engagement influences mental as well as physical health. OTs believe that occupational performance, organization, choice and satisfaction are determined by the relationship between persons and their environments. They approach mental health with the unique perspective that considers a person's needs within context of their family and community.



Occupational therapists are uniquely positioned through their knowledge and practicum training to introduce new ideas, adaptive strategies and intervention methods, followed by developing and monitoring an intervention plan/process within the home and community environment.

“An individual with a spinal cord injury might return to the workforce with necessary mobility equipment, accessibility arrangements, and an identified career match and training determined through OT assessment and implementation.”

Facts about Occupational Therapy in Alberta

- There are over 2000 registered occupational therapists currently working within Alberta's medical, health, education and social systems.
- Since 2008, students graduating from OT programs have obtained Master's degrees, making them highly qualified health professionals (prior to 2008 OTs had a minimum of four year university degree).
- Through their training, OTs study both biological and social sciences, allowing for a more thorough understanding of complex characteristics of, and interactions between, a person's physical, social, cultural, and institutional environments.
- Their education, knowledge, and skills enable them to deliver both physical and mental health care as well as to situate that care within the patient's customary environments.
- OTs have a substantial role across sectors of care including acute care, primary health care, continuing care, public health and wellness, palliative care and assisted dying, and mental health and addictions.
- OTs are generally employed in community agencies, health care organizations such as hospitals, chronic care facilities, rehabilitation centers and clinics, but are also prominently found in schools, criminal justice facilities, social agencies, industry, medical legal consultation and/or working in private practice.





How Occupational Therapy Aligns with the Priorities of AB Health

This government is committed to improving access to health care providers across the province of Alberta and develop sustainable strategies that ensure the appropriate education, scope of practice, supply and distribution of health care providers. Distribution of health care providers across sectors is a key current issue that is both linked to fiscal feasibility and to meet the expectations of Alberta citizens.

OT is currently under-utilized within community education, hospital, work and home contexts. Greater inclusion promises an evolution in the health system that meets the broad constructs of health and well-being that includes sustainable resources, social justice and equity.

"Changes in the nature and distribution of health and risk of ill health coupled with an enhanced understanding of the determinants of health and illness have altered the nature of demand for services that health professionals provide...Occupational therapy practitioners offer services not only to individual clients who seek to alter their levels of engagement and participation but also to groups of people who seek to alter levels of health and well being." (Wilson & Landry, 2014).¹


This government is looking to enhance accountability and promote practice excellence among regulated health care providers.


OT has a long tradition of health promotion and implementation of prevention strategies that enable people to manage and improve their overall functional status. There is an inextricable link between people and their environments, and understanding the roles, responsibilities and meaning of individuals, families and communities underpins the practical implementation of therapeutic interventions.

Our societies are complex and interrelated. Health cannot be separated from other goals. The inextricable links between people and their environment constitutes the basis for a socio-econological approach to health...Changing patterns of life, work and leisure have significant impact on health. Work and leisure should be a source of health for people. (World Health Organization, 1986, para.4)

Success is readily measured in the influence of health promotion behaviours on decreasing individual and population use of acute health settings in an attempt to seek necessary chronic care resources and interventions (e.g. an emergency visit related to a fall that could have been prevented by assistive equipment).

¹ Wilson, S. A. & Landry, G. (2014). Task Analysis: An Individual, Group, and Population Approach. Methesda, MA: AOTA Press (p. 56).





The healthy communities movement seeks to build and strengthen multi-sectoral partnerships to improve health and social conditions in the spaces where people live, advocate for the formulation of health-related public policy, maintain healthy communities and promote healthy lifestyles. (Wilson & Landry, 2014).

This government is committed to increasing timely access for all Albertans to primary health care services where they see the right provider at the right time, in the right place.

Occupational therapy can assist with mobilizing community action to construct guiding principles for work in primary health care systems. OT services that are strongly present in primary health care services ensures the following steps are taken in overall care of Albertans at the right time, for the right reasons:

- evaluation of functional and performance capacities;
- provision of education regarding beneficial and practical interventions and resources;
- skill development training with individual clients and caregivers in the context of everyday activities;
- modification of environments for healthy and safe occupation/activity performance;
- promotion of development and maintenance of mental functioning abilities through engagement in productive and meaningful activities and relationships; and
- provision of training in adaptation to change and in coping with adversity to promote mental health.

Occupational therapy is prepared to establish a voice in developing good public policy and health promotion initiatives through collaborative communication among health and education disciplines and community partners/citizens.

