

Finding my Way at the NZAOT Conference

By Maya Hammarsal



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'Hi, I've won a spot prize,' said a chuffed therapist, to the registration staff of NZAOT's Shifting Sands Conference in Nelson. 'I'll have a bit of that,' I thought and headed for the exhibition area. An excited buzz hit me as people caught up with old acquaintances over the complimentary wine and nibbles.

'Good day, are you a reflective therapist?' Despina from OTBNZ, asked as she handed me a small mirror. 'Well, I certainly am now,' I thought - and it is my reflections of the conference I want to share.

I came to New Zealand from Jersey, Channel Islands last November, after being convinced by Christine Higgins of EnZed Paramedical that New Zealand was the place to practice. In my former life in the UK I was very active with the British Association of Occupational Therapy and chaired a national specialist section around work.

As another recently arrived occupational therapist, Joseph Paradza from Zimbabwe, said to me, 'I believe you need to be part of the organisation to keep ongoing practice in line with the changing dynamic nature of occupational therapy... personally I wouldn't want to miss anything like this [the conference] - to see what other avenues to take, to do what others are doing, and enrich the profession.'

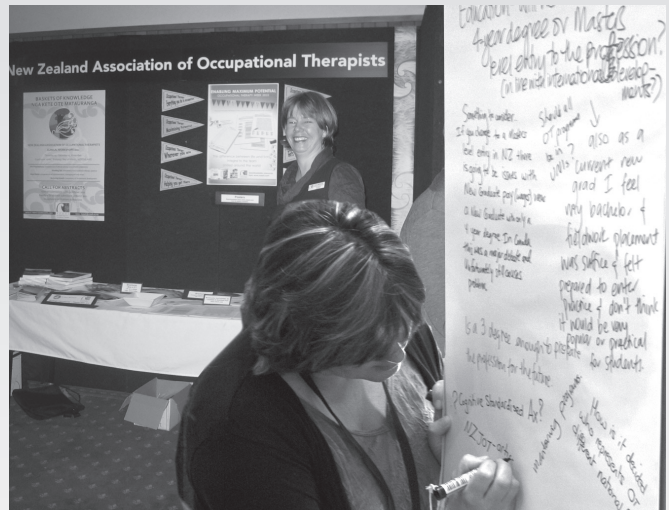
I've attended many occupational therapy conferences overseas and my impressions of the NZAOT conference were favourable. Everyone was really friendly and ready to talk about what they were doing in their practice. It's clear there is a good network of information sharing and support within the organisation. The programme looked good with a spread of workshops, paper sessions and reputable keynote speeches.

Comparative differences to other conferences I have attended:

- prizes to be won for simply being there
- quality food well presented
- decent conference centre
- gifts of appreciation to all presenters
- key note speakers on all days
- active involvement in AGM by members
- networking and a sense of friendship
- competitions (my table won the conference dinner prize!)
- lots of little presents - sweets, pens, pads, mirrors, badges

I can't think of anything I experienced at other conferences that I found missing at this one and all the above were 'cherries on the cake.'

What struck me was how many occupational therapists were at the conference - at around 20%, it is a figure occupational therapy bodies elsewhere would envy. I definitely think this is something NZAOT should be proud of. However, for the organisation to be sustainable, they need to attract more therapists. I asked some practitioners from Auckland why they had come to the conference but hadn't joined the organisation. They said, 'In their opinion the price of membership was too high.' It is unfortunate that some therapists can't see any appreciable benefit to themselves in becoming members.



NZAOT membership and marketing coordinator Dael Williams approves of Rita Robinson tagging the graffiti boards outside the NZAOT stand.

A council initiative that certainly has been implemented and was getting the thumbs up at the conference, was the Permanent Scientific Programme Committee instigated to work alongside a local committee at programme planning for conferences. As Kim Henneker, a practitioner from Hawkes Bay said, 'You can tell the difference going to the sessions. There is a wide mix of topics with continuity through the papers; you can tell the threads are well thought out. I got chatting to Alexandra Lowans - part of the Nelson organising committee and liaison with the Permanent Scientific Committee on the same subject. Alex said, 'I don't feel scientific. I'm a good organiser, I may never be a good presenter, but that doesn't mean I don't think it's important to be involved.' She has been a member of the NZAOT since her graduation 20 years ago, and believes, 'we have a wealth of really great people in the New Zealand profession.'

That said, what I found a little depressing was that in the 15 years I've been an occupational therapist, our profession, the world over, is trying to make people understand what we do and why we are necessary, and we as therapists seem to be uncertain ourselves. For us to help others know what we are as occupational therapists, we have to understand what our core skills, values and principles are. More importantly we have to seize the challenges of the future and take our opportunities before other's get there first. How many times have I sat in lectures and conferences over the years and heard our professional leaders clarion call to action, only to find next year they are having to say it all again.

When, I ask myself, will occupational therapy be the rock upon which its therapists feel able to stand with confidence in this time of change and shifting sand? These themes were taken up through the conference.

For a non-New Zealander the welcome by the local Iwi was fascinating, and set a respectful tone to the conference which was great to have. I think it is fantastic that Māori culture is recognised and respected and I hope this continues to strengthen and grow. In particular I liked the opportunity to share in the opening and closing ceremonies and to hear (and try to sing), te reo. It would be good to have this language either written or spoken in more of the presentations. I think a focus away from the dominant 'English' culture should be a firm foundation on which to look at and understand the multicultural aspects of New Zealand society in general. I would like to see more sessions on the diversity and the specific occupational needs of people from different cultures living here.



Grace O'Sullivan (centre front) with past Francis Rutherford Lecture Award recipients.

Mike Ward - MP, artist, adventurer, sculptor, gave the conference's opening speech. As he said, 'You're only a risk taker if you can see the risks, but by in large, I don't see the risks.' He has sound advice, 'telling people what not to do just turns them off, far better to find them an alternative'.

The Frances Rutherford Lecture was given by Grace O'Sullivan. A woman I had never heard of to that date and who I labelled a wonder and quite possibly a national treasure! I couldn't believe that she had obtained her Bachelor of Health degree in 1999, at the age of 45 and in eleven years had achieved so much. The fact she has a documentary crew following her about spoke volumes about her status within wider society.

As an advocate for people with organic mental illnesses she enacted action research and discovered that anti psychotics were not the way to go with people with dementia. After challenging the medical regime and getting it changed, through sound clinical reasoning, relatives of those her research have helped literally got their parents/spouses back. As she said people were more responsive, orientated and alert; falls and management problems were reduced or eliminated, and their families happier. **As Grace said, 'Health is more than the absence of disease. It's not what we are, are given, or have - it is what we do that makes life worth living.'**

Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited, whereas imagination entrances the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution (Einstein 1929). Grace had the imagination to see things differently, and thousands of people will benefit from this wonderful woman's work. She rightly received a standing ovation.

Home grown leaders in our profession were not the only source of inspiration. I was particularly impressed by the line up of world class key note speakers on every day of the conference. Something I'd not experienced elsewhere.

Professor Wendy Wood of Colorado State University gave a thought provoking and interesting presentation called: *Navigating Shifting Sands: Lessons from Wise Wayfinders*. Wendy said we should look for the 'Inukshuks' in our profession. Originally piles of stones stacked to shape a human form, which indicates to wayfarers in a harsh environment, 'I have been this way before, and it's a good one.'

For Wendy, negotiating the shifting sands of our environment is to follow the path:



Grace O'Sullivan presents her lecture to delegates while being filmed for TVNZ's Close Up documentary. [Link to view the documentary in Info Exchange.](#)



Wendy Wood's wayfinding presentation was delivered around the notion of inukshuk - images of which can be seen on the screens.

- lean into disorientating dilemmas and persevere
- learn from those who illuminate occupational therapy
- feed your intellectual curiosity about the field
- find your community and grow
- build robust communities of practice through compelling occupational visions

I got the impression through the sterling examples she gave of professional pioneers worldwide: Elizabeth Yerxa, Mary Reilly, Gary Keilhofner, Susan Coppola, Betty Hasselkus to name just a few, that they have gone before us and 'found it good.' The challenge for us as practitioners is to follow their path and be brave enough to establish paths ourselves that will help those who will eventually follow us.

At the end of her inspirational speech Wendy asked us to reflect on our own practice and consider: 'How are you now, and how might you better build robust communities of practice that help countless occupational therapists today and tomorrow, reach new destinations that resonate within our field - 'the home of everyday occupation and it's impact on human flourishing.' 'How are you now, and how might you become ever more audacious as a wayfinder?' 'Are you ready to find the destinations that await in places never imagined?'

I'd first met Matthew Molineux, now Associate Professor at Curtin University, Australia, when he had been doing his PhD in the UK about 10 years ago. He had set up the UK's network for occupational science and I was keen to catch up with him. I remember how he'd been seen as a radical way back then. A British occupational therapist referred to him as 'the antichrist of occupational therapy' for daring to suggest that occupational therapists should be focussing on occupation!

Matthew's key note speech '*Standing Firm on Shifting Sands*,' was another challenging address in which he picked up the theme of identity. He raised the question, 'what makes us occupational therapists as distinct from any other profession?'

He went on to elaborate that installing assistive devices may be what we do but asked 'is that what we want to sell to the world as our unique selling point?' We can do physical modalities i.e. splinting or work with a cognitive behavioural model, but just because we can, for Matthew, doesn't mean its occupational therapy. He suggested that we confuse people if we say we do these things - for what is the difference then between occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers or community mental health nurses?

Saying that we work with function is no longer enough. The World Health Organisation now defines function with disability and health and many other professions are jumping on that band wagon.

I had a series of physiotherapy sessions recently for a chronic ankle problem. My course of treatment started with me having to identify three occupations that I could no longer do, and for which I wanted to regain the function to perform again. I was left wondering who the occupational therapist was in the room. Matthew suggested that we can't say we focus on function - we must lead on this. Why we haven't, Matthew suggests, is due to the way we perceive ourselves and present ourselves to the world. He quoted the sociologist Anthony Giddens,



Matthew Mollineux (centre) giving it and taking it during his presentation



Not everyone dressed up for the dinner, but it didn't matter – everyone got into the swing of 'Life's a Beach!'

and his theory of ontological security to back his point up. In order to feel safe we must trust in how we see the world and respond to it. We need a shared framework for people to feel comforted by it.

For Matthew it's simple - we need to articulate our professional philosophy. We must look at particular skills that make our profession what it is, and be empowered by this. Concentrating on limited areas and applying skillful pruning leads to controlled development, and the development of philosophical growth in a reasonable way. As occupational therapists we should be concerned for using occupation to improve health in clients. Every aspect of occupational therapy should be occupation based right from the fundamentals of learning in our colleges, though our clinical practice, and the presentation of ourselves to others. 'Reconnect with occupation,' says Matthew, occupational therapists should not

be conducting research outside of occupation. It may mean having to change services and for us to adopt the language of occupation when talking to our clients and colleagues but that's all great. Matthew said, 'Don't say, 'I'm just doing cooking,' present this multi-faceted occupation for what it is.' It may be common sense to us, and seem like a cushy number by colleagues who don't understand occupation, but to the clients struggling to overcome occupational problems it's far from simple. So as Matthew said, 'tell it as it really is!'

Finally I just wanted to recap on what was on offer and why it's worth attending conference.

You get:

- the chance to hear world class key note speakers every day
- a broad well thought out range of paper sessions
- practical workshops
- spot prizes and lots of fun
- opening reception and conference fancy dress dinner - with prizes (my table won the big one)
- a range of specialist service and equipment providers along with several competitions and more prizes to be won
- To attend the AGM, where you get a chance to have your say, find out what has been going on, hear

and see the association council, and exercise your democratic rights

- networking opportunities - invaluable!
- a chance to learn and grow, to reflect and consider - priceless

Judy Wallace, from Fielding and of A1 Wheelchair Service's said they have been to occupational therapy conferences before and say it is worth coming and giving their sponsorship to the NZAOT. For her, even though costs of attendance are high, it is a good opportunity to network and obtain business exposure, and simply to support the NZAOT. She wouldn't miss a conference, and plans to attend the clinical workshops in Waitangi in 2011.

As a final thought I would have liked to have seen a recognition or acknowledgement of wider 'green' issues. This is not an area that our profession can ignore for many reasons and I throw it out there for consideration, while understanding that maybe I need to be working on a paper for the next conference... that's it isn't it?

It's for each one of us to find the way. To discover new paths through the challenges of an ever changing world and as Wendy says, 'leave Inukshuk's, or path markers, for others to follow.'

