

# **The role of occupational therapists working with older people in residential care**

## **BACKGROUND**

This position statement has been developed in consultation with occupational therapists who work with older people living in residential care facilities throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. For the purpose of this statement the term residential care facilities will include rest homes, private hospitals and dementia care units. The statement aims to define and clarify the scope of practice for occupational therapy within this sector, and communicate the philosophy, key tasks and skills to stakeholders. This includes residents and their families, management and service providers.

Due to the unprecedented growth of an ageing population (Statistics New Zealand, 2004), working with older people who live in residential care is a rapidly expanding area of practice for occupational therapists. Although older people are staying in the community for longer, when they enter residential care they have increasingly complex health issues which challenge their ability to maintain a sense of health, well being, competence and identity.

Occupational therapy is a unique profession whose core philosophy, specialist skills and knowledge are designed to promote life satisfaction by assisting older people to participate in daily activities. In keeping with The Positive Aging Strategy released by the Ministry of Health (2002) occupational therapists offer a holistic approach to the delivery of health services for older people who live in residential care.

## **PHILOSOPHY**

Occupational therapists who work with older people living in residential care facilities believe residents benefit from having access to their professional skills and knowledge. They have long advocated that older people should be encouraged to take part in valued roles and daily activities, to maintain links to their family/whanau and within their communities. An increasing body of literature has now confirmed the crucial link between health and participation in purposeful occupation across the life span (e.g. Chung, 2004; Wood, 2005).

Participation in occupation within residential care facilities is encouraged to ensure that older people are enabled to achieve their highest potential and live satisfying lives.

When working with older people the purpose of occupational therapy is to:

- Facilitate occupational opportunities

- Promote environments that nurture community interaction between the person, their family, staff of residential care facilities and the wider community

## **CORE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

Occupational therapists working with the older person in residential care facilities use engagement in occupation as their primary modality to assist the resident to achieve life satisfaction. Core skills in this specialised area of practice include, but are not limited to:

- Assessing physical, cognitive, sensory, emotional and spiritual status and environmental factors, and their impact on the individual's participation in activities of daily living.
- Assessing occupational history, aspirations and potential.
- Working alongside people to plan interventions that are goal-directed, therapeutic and person-centred.
- Evaluating occupational therapy interventions in collaboration with the person, their family and other staff members, to ensure best practice.
- In-depth understanding of the ageing process, dementia, and how it impacts upon occupational performance within the residential setting.
- Understanding of cultural factors and how these may affect people's perception of ageing and related occupational needs.
- Recognising people as occupational beings and the implicit link between health and occupation.
- Accessing resources, prescribe equipment and modify the environment to enable and enhance occupational performance.
- Promoting effective service provision, including ongoing education for key stakeholders (residents, management and staff) and supervision of activity co-ordinators.
- Communicating effectively.

## **COMPETENCY**

The Occupational Therapy Board of New Zealand (2004) requires occupational therapists to maintain standards of professional competence under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003. Accordingly,

current theory and evidence-based practice are used to guide professional practice.

To this end occupational therapists are committed to the following:

- Maintaining knowledge and skills by engaging in ongoing education.
- Participating in ongoing review and evaluation of current literature examining the link between occupation and health, with particular reference to the well-being of older adults in residential care facilities.
- Ensuring access to a supervisor or mentor who can facilitate and monitor ongoing development of practice, to ensure practice meets the requirements of the role.
- Recognising the value of networking with other occupational therapists working in residential care.
- Attending or contributing to relevant conferences and workshops to maintain a link with related service providers and promote the role of occupational therapy in this sector of health.

## **TREATY OF WAITANGI**

The principles of the Treaty of Waitangi are closely aligned to the philosophy of occupational therapy. Occupational therapists working in residential care facilities recognise this relationship by treating all residents and their families as equal partners. Their right to take part in any decision making process related to their care is respected and protected.

## **RESEARCH**

NZAOT endorses the need for ongoing research into the value of occupational therapy practice in residential care facilities. Research findings to date (Chung, 2004, Fine, 2000, French, 2002, Green & Cooper, 2000, Mozley, 2001, Perrin, 1997) validate the role of occupational therapy in residential care facilities and underscore the value it has in promoting wellness and helping older people to maintain quality of life and maximise skills.

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