



AOTI
Association of Occupational
Therapists of Ireland

Position Paper

Occupational Therapy and Older Adults

Older Persons Advisory Group
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Introduction

The number of older people living in Ireland is expected to increase significantly by 2030. It is expected that the population of those aged 65 years and over will increase by 58-63 per cent and the number of people aged 85 years and over is projected to double (ESRI, 2017).

Health and social care services must adapt to these changing demographics and societal structures to better meet the needs of the older population.

Occupational therapists work with older people in a variety of health and social care settings. The profession aims to maximise the person's functional ability and promote participation in valued daily activities and life roles. While later life can be a time for growth and continued contribution to society, many older people experience changes in their health, functional abilities and environment which can impact on opportunities to engage in meaningful occupations. Occupational therapists have an important role in supporting the wellbeing and unique health needs of older people using a holistic, person-centred approach.

Purpose of the Position Being Taken

The purpose of this position statement is to increase awareness of the value of Occupational Therapy in supporting older people to participate fully in society by maximising their independence and promoting engagement in meaningful occupations.

The Role of Occupational Therapy with Older Adults

Occupational Therapy is a client-centred profession that encourages choice and autonomy whilst promoting participation in valued activities and maintenance of social connections. Occupational therapists are particularly skilled in working with older people across a range of services such as acute care, rehabilitation, community services, psychiatry of later life, intellectual disability and at end-of-life. Occupational Therapy practice is evidence-based and guided by a number of conceptual models. At the core of these models is a focus on occupational performance and the factors that can impact this, i.e. the intrinsic factors (person), environmental enablers and barriers, and the occupations (activities), (WFOT, 2021). This approach is distinct from that of other health care professionals and is particularly important for the older population as their activities, roles and routines develop with them into later life.

Occupational therapists analyse the interaction between the person, the environment, and the occupation to enhance occupational performance and promote productive ageing. Through setting meaningful goals collaboratively with clients, the occupational therapist can tailor their intervention to suit the person's needs. Occupational therapists are particularly skilled in the following areas:

Activity of daily living management

- Occupational therapists offer expertise and education in activity analysis and adaptation to support performance.

Home and environmental modifications

- Occupational therapists are experts in environmental assessment and interventions which can include the appropriate use of assistive technology and environmental adaptations.

Cognition and dementia

- Occupational therapists provide support and education for both clients and their family members to manage the functional implications of cognitive impairment and improve quality of life, interactions and relationships. Occupational therapists can support clients with dementia and other diagnoses that affect their cognition.

Mental health and well-being

- Occupational therapists work with older people and their caregivers to address the challenges of mental ill health and develop collaborative goals with the older person to enable them to resume engagement in the occupations they need and want to do

Social and community participation

- Older adults play a key role in communities, in roles such as work, volunteering and caregiving. Occupational therapists can support these roles by ensuring that these environments are accessible and supportive to the needs of older people.

Falls prevention, response, and management

- Occupational therapists have a comprehensive understanding of the impact of cognitive, environmental, visual, and behavioural factors in falls prevention, response and management.

Frailty

- Occupational therapists work with older adults with frailty to identify modifiable risk factors and address functional and environmental issues so as to promote independent living, facilitate discharge home from hospital and reduce the risk of admission to acute services.

Decision-making, capacity and autonomy

- Occupational therapists work as part of a team to support decision-making and determine capacity, specifically in relation to independent living.

Seating and pressure care

- Occupational therapists have core assessment skills in posture and pressure care. Appropriate seating can enable occupational performance and social interaction, support engagement with the environment and improve quality of life. Appropriate seating can also reduce the risk of secondary complications related to poor positioning or pressure care (e.g. pressure ulcers, pain, loss of functional range of motion).

Driving and community mobility

- Occupational therapists have the knowledge and skills to understand the impact of ageing on driving activities. With a good understanding of the importance of the role of driving for older people, Occupational therapists can support behavioural and habitual driving modifications and support individuals to maintain independence with driving. Occupational therapists can also offer guidance in the transition from driving to retirement.

Chronic conditions – self-management and symptom management

- Occupational therapists can educate and support clients with self-management techniques such as stress, falls prevention and fatigue management strategies, to manage the impact and life changes caused by living with a chronic illness. They can also enhance coping skills to manage symptoms, deal with exacerbations and establish routines to enable participation in valued occupations.

The occupational therapist's skills in these areas are central to supporting older people with the aim of maintaining quality of life and enabling continued participation in meaningful occupations. Occupational therapists also work closely with family and caregivers to promote safe performance of occupations at home and in the client's community, supporting ageing in place.

Benefits of Occupational Therapy for Older Adults in Society

While many older people are living independently in the community with improved life expectancy, an increasing number of people experience multiple chronic illnesses, frailty, polypharmacy and other syndromes associated with ageing. The overarching aim of Ireland's National Clinical Programme for Older Persons is to support this cohort to live well in their own homes and communities. The desire to 'age in place' is one that is shared by many older people.

Occupational therapists' specialist knowledge and skills can be utilised to optimise an older person's independence and ultimately support them to remain at home. Supporting older people to stay at home benefits both the person and society as older people enrich communities with their wealth of knowledge, skills and experience.

Occupational therapists' skill set also offers financial benefit to society through the provision of cost-effective interventions. For example, occupational therapists facilitate successful and timely discharges from hospital whilst improving outcomes for patients (Rogers et al, 2016), ultimately reducing the high cost of care. Occupational therapists have also been involved in preventative initiatives such as a community frailty response service for older adults for whom hospital admission might be avoided by providing comprehensive assessment in their own homes (McNamara et al, 2020). Occupational therapists provide assessment of cognition and function within the home environment, provide education to the older person and carers, organise equipment and link the older person with community services.

Preventative occupational therapy, such as the Lifestyle Redesign programme, has shown significant impact on older people by improving a range of physical and mental health dimensions and also demonstrates cost-effectiveness in conjunction with a trend toward decreased medical expenditures (Cassidy et al., 2017; Clark et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 1998). Occupational therapists also have a role in empowering people to manage their own health through initiatives such as promoting brain health education, to reduce modifiable risk factors which can reduce the incidence or delay the onset of symptoms of dementia (Brain Health Scotland, 2020). Occupational therapists also provide cost-effective interventions to people with dementia. One example is cognitive stimulation therapy (CST), the benefits of which (enhanced cognitive function and quality of life) may be over and above pharmacological interventions (Knapp et al., 2005; D'Amico et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2012).

Recommendations for Future Occupational Therapy Developments

Occupational Therapy services should be available for older people across a broad spectrum of healthcare settings including acute care, rehabilitation facilities, community, reablement units, step-up and step-down facilities. Widespread availability of Occupational Therapy services would facilitate older people’s engagement in meaningful occupations and optimise quality of life at every stage of the individual’s care pathway.

<p>Clinical services</p>	<p>Continued development and delivery of clinical services in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention of hospital admissions, home-based rehabilitation and reablement • Frailty services, optimal discharge planning • Health promotion programmes for older people with chronic conditions, including dementia, to support functional ability and continued participation in meaningful contexts • Develop accessible telehealth services for older people and adequate supports for their caregivers • Long-term care services, enhance nursing home care provision and develop alternative community-based care models
<p>Research and education</p>	<p>Continued engagement in research and education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and conduct research to capture the experience of older adults and demonstrate the role of occupational therapy in assessing and supporting cognition, function, social and environmental status and mood, along with values and preferences of the older person • Design and conduct research to demonstrate effectiveness of Occupational Therapy interventions for various cohorts of older people • Collaborate with older people, other professional groups and community agencies to identify research priorities and to reflect needs and preferences of older people

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance and develop undergraduate and postgraduate education to address changing population needs due to ageing and prevalence of age-related conditions • Facilitate engagement in Continuing Professional Development in relevant areas of practice working with older people to support active ageing and participation in valued occupations
Advocacy and representation	<p>Continued engagement in advocacy and representation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure voices and concerns of older adults are heard in identification, design and delivery of service and research priorities • Empower older adults to enable their continued participation in society • Ensure rights-based approach is adopted in service delivery and to promote decision-making based on the older person's will and preference, with consideration for their abilities and support needs

Figure 1: Recommendations for future Occupational Therapy development

Conclusion

Occupational therapists adopt a comprehensive and client-centred approach when working with older adults to support their occupational participation and engagement in a wide range of settings. Occupational Therapy services utilise theory and evidence-based approaches which consider personal and environmental factors that impact on participation in meaningful occupations and life roles. Older adults can benefit from the wide range of cognitive, environmental and lifestyle supports to optimise healthy and active ageing. Occupational therapists have expertise to work with individuals, their families and the wider community network to support participation and inclusion.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to this position paper.

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Approval and Review Date

This AOTI document was written by the Older Persons Advisory Group and approved for publication by the Management Team. It will be reviewed within 3 years of the approval date.

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