Maintaining professional identity and role in the modern workplace

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In the last decade, occupational therapists have faced new performance and commissioning demands from the state. These demands, such as Payment by Results (PbR) or funding tied to performance, have, on the face of it, improved service delivery and patient experience. However, they have also introduced new ways of working and new demands from management that have contributed to a crisis of identity, as therapists struggle to reconcile conflicting professional, managerial, and service demands with their day-to-day practice (Lloyd et al 2010).

Professionals possess a unique and complex body of knowledge that cannot easily be appreciated and under- stood by those outside the profession. This body of knowledge, along with autonomy and self-regulation, are regarded as important aspects of professionalism and professional identity. However, it is now customary for occupational therapists to work as lone professionals within multi-disciplinary teams, often with professionals of other disciplines as their line or service managers, thereby experiencing differing local management and variant local practice. These changes have benefited service delivery, making it seamless, account- able, and more efficient, but they have also come at a cost to occupational therapy because they have placed therapists outside of their professional and traditional structures of accountability, leadership, and supervision. Without these structures, therapists can become isolated from their profession and its unique understanding of how to be an occupational therapist.

Since the 1950s, professional groups have experienced a decline in their autonomy and power as a result of the increased influence and encroaching demands of the state. These demands are driven by capitalist notions of profit, efficiency, and financial accountability and have driven much of the change we have seen in our profession. However, if unchecked, these notions also have the potential to erode the autonomy, professional identity, and core values of our profession. The challenge for occupational therapy is to manage change and the state's demands whist also maintaining our professional identity and autonomy. This is an important issue because, without a clear understanding of what an occupational therapist is and does, we will be no different from any other occupation. In the 1970s, occupational therapists responded to another challenge — their dissatisfaction with the mechanistic approach to treatment — by returning to their theoretical roots and the grounding of practice in activity. More recently, the College of Occupational Therapists produced a guidance document, Recovering ordinary lives (COT 2006), identifying the need for therapists to focus on occupation as a core concept of occupational therapy. Other authors have identified individual assessment and treatment, group work, and discharge planning as core elements of occupational therapy (Simpson et al 2005). By focusing on these core elements, therapists will be able to navigate this challenge. They will help them to understand how and when

to use occupational therapy interventions and why. They will provide a framework for understanding, for the development of practice, and for staying focused on professional role and treatment outcomes. But, most importantly of all, they will reinforce professional identity, purpose, and autonomy in an ever-changing workplace environment.

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