

INVITED ARTICLE

Occupational therapy in Malta today - an enabling profession

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Occupational Therapy (OT) has now become an established paramedical profession, and an integral member of the multi-disciplinary treatment team. OT departments are to be found in the main hospitals in Malta and Gozo, as well as in the community. This article looks at the origins and developments of OT and the present service delivery.

Definition

OT can be described as the use of purposeful activity or intervention designed to achieve functional outcomes which promote health, prevent injury or disability and which develop, improve, sustain or restore the highest possible level of independence of any individual who has an illness, injury, cognitive impairment, psychosocial dysfunction, mental illness, developmental learning disability, or other disorder¹.

Philosophical Base

Man is an active being whose development is influenced by the use of purposeful activity. Using their capacity for intrinsic motivation, human beings are able to influence their physical and mental health, and their social and physical environment, through purposeful activity. Human life includes a process of continuous adaptation. Adaptation is a change in function that promotes social and self actualisation. Biological, psychological and environmental factors may interrupt the adaptation process at any time through the life cycle. Dysfunction may occur when adaptation is impaired: purposeful activity facilitates the adaptive process.

OT is based on the belief that purposeful activity (occupation), including its interpersonal and environmental components, may be used to prevent and mediate dysfunction, and to elicit maximum adaptation. Activity as used by the occupational therapist, includes both an intrinsic and a therapeutic purpose².

Historical Background

The idea of treatment by occupation is not a new concept. Its value has been recognised from the earliest days of medicine. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks were the pioneers in utilising work and social activities for the treatment of persons suffering from physical and

psychiatric ailments. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, occupations were prescribed regularly as treatment for the mentally ill. During World War I, developments occurred in the physical field as well, and the value of occupational activity in the restoration of function after physical illness or injury, was formally appreciated³.

Locally, the Ministry of Health recruited the first expatriate occupational therapists in 1956. During the late 1950s and early 1960s staff continued to be engaged from abroad at irregular intervals. Though providing a service, such a system had inherent defects as no continuity existed to establish OT on a significant, expanding and permanent basis. When overseas recruitment became impossible, the authorities selected two Maltese applicants to study abroad. On their return to Malta in 1974, they embarked on the task of organising OT on a professional footing in local hospitals⁴.

Present Service Delivery

From its modest beginnings, OT has now spread significantly throughout the main health care facilities locally. The following is an overview of the services provided:

St. Luke's Hospital

The OT department is committed to deliver physical rehabilitation services which are provided in order to meet the needs of those individuals who suffer from physical disabilities, so that each person is assisted towards physical, psychological and vocational independence. The department caters for **three main areas**:

Paediatric OT: This is situated at the **Child Development Assessment Unit**. Here, the therapist evaluates a child's performance in relation to what is developmentally expected of that age group. If there is discrepancy between developmental milestones and functional ability, the OT looks at a variety of perceptual and neuromuscular factors which influence function. The OT is also concerned with the use of specific techniques such as sensory integration, in treating children with pervasive developmental disorders, dyspraxia and other multi-sensory disorders.

Drawing from the knowledge of neurology, kinesiology, diagnosis and current research, the therapist can identify the children with the best potential for remediation through OT. At the CDAU an interdisciplinary team approach is adopted; each team member assesses the referral, then follows it up with a report and action plan that is later discussed at a case conference which is held weekly.

Out Patients Service: Hand therapy within the **OT Hand Clinic** forms an integral part of this service. Upper extremity care specific to the patient is provided. The therapist works with patients affected by accident or trauma leaving them with wounds, scars, burns, injured tendons, or nerves, fractures or even amputation of the fingers, hands and arms. Skilled at dynamic, static and functional splinting, the therapist assesses, plans and treats each client on an individual basis. The OT outpatient area also offers a service to patients discharged from the wards, but who require further treatment. This service covers orthopaedic, neurosurgical, neurological, rheumatological, medical and general surgical cases. Liaison with other team members is indispensable.

Inpatients Service: Here the OT aims to improve the functional abilities of patients and to facilitate early discharge and seamless transition to the community. All main hospital areas are covered, with treatment being carried out either on the wards or at the OT department. **Home visits** are carried out, and environmental adaptations, aids and equipment may be prescribed. Patients requiring further rehabilitation after discharge can attend OT as outpatients. Teamwork is essential.

Mount Carmel Hospital

In line with National Mental Health Policy, the OT department, through its base of purposeful activities, offers a range of appropriate services to empower people to cope better with mental health issues thus maximising their productive and social life. At the hospital, therapists cover the **five main areas** – admission, rehabilitation, psycho-organic, learning disabilities and young people. The work is carried out in two main units, on the wards or in specific units within the specialised areas. Working closely with the team, the therapist assesses and draws up treatment plans which may include work activities; group work; social, leisure and recreational events; activities of daily living; social skills training; creative and self expressive activities; and self care. **Community work** includes home visits, assistance in the home, monitoring of resettled clients, and the provision of a day care service to appropriate discharged patients.

OT in mental health also features the **Qormi Day Centre**, set up in 1995 as part of community pilot project covering Qormi, Siggiewi and Zebbug. Individualised care is provided, and after an initial assessment, goals are set up between the therapist and the client. A programme of activities is drafted and

implemented to fulfil established goals. Besides, the clients' carers are also offered ongoing support.

The mental health services at St. Luke's Hospital, namely the **Psychiatric Unit** and the **Psychiatric Outpatients Department**, are also covered by OT. The therapist carries out mainly individual and group tasks and **community work**.

St. Vincent de Paule Residence (SVPR)

The OT department focuses on helping older persons, both residents of the facility as well as those still living in the community, achieve maximum independence and quality of life. Through assessment, treatment, education and care, the therapist helps to maintain good health, prevent disease, provide rehabilitation and promote a safe, functional environment. OT can help older persons adapt to their new way of life by recommending the best available equipment, aids and adaptations to encourage functional performance necessary for the art of living.

At SVPR, the OT department has **four main inputs**. Inpatient services cover the admission and assessment unit; the general wards; the respite service unit; group therapy; and therapeutic diversional activities. Out Patient services cater for older persons living in the southern part of Malta; referrals come from St. Luke's or Zammit Clapp Hospital, GPs, or from other OTs or health professionals.

OT is actively involved in **community service**. The therapist carries out home visits to ensure access, safety, comfort and functionality of the older persons in their own environment. **Government homes for the elderly** also benefit from the expertise of OTs who carry out assessments to evaluate the need for intervention. Lectures are delivered to groups of older persons in the community, like day centres and parish groups. **Public awareness** is important, and OTs promote their contribution to the elderly by taking part in television and radio programmes, as well as participating in stands organised by local councils.

Zammit Clapp Hospital

At this facility, which specialises in the assessment and management of the frail elderly suffering from multiple problems, input is required from a multidisciplinary team. OT services include both **in-patient and day hospital intervention**, offering individual assessment, treatment and patient/carer education with the aim of returning the patient back home to lead a life of maximal independence in personal, instrumental and social tasks. The OTs work within a team that offers other services featuring a **Dementia Group** and Parkinson's Disease programmes. There is also involvement in a **Stroke Support Group**.

The OTs screen all admissions on the wards and intervene accordingly. On the day hospital, referrals are made to the OT department from the doctors on the clinic days or from the wards as follow ups. Other members of the team can also refer directly to the department. Rehabilitation includes motor control,

sensory re-education, cognitive and visual perceptual skills, communication, activities of daily living, splinting and social, emotional and vocational aspects. Activities and skills like cane work, pottery, gardening and creative arts are used as media for therapeutic benefits and return of function.

In its efforts to upgrade standards and services, the OT department is working on plans to utilise standardised assessments in different performance components and areas of treatment with the aim of providing reliable outcome measures of rehabilitation, as well as carrying out research to obtain evidence of successful practice.

Boffa Hospital

Here, OT intervention is based on a **holistic patient centred approach**, which is flexible and constantly being reassessed according to the needs of patients and their carers. The treatment varies according to the different conditions, which include spinal cord injuries, cancer and multiple sclerosis.

The tools of the OT feature the use of functional activities for the treatment of physical dysfunction; retraining in personal and domestic activities of daily living; and re-education of cognitive and perceptual dysfunction. **Home visits** and assessments are also carried out, with provisions of adaptations where required. Importance is given to psychological adjustment and goal setting related to loss of function, and the support and education of carers.

There is liaison with the **Hospice Movement**; assistance is extended to the **Hospice Day Centre** and community visits to patients receiving Hospice help are carried out where required.

Gozo

There is an OT department at the General Hospital which caters for paediatrics, the elderly, the general wards as well as the outpatients. Visits on a regular basis are also carried out at the adult training centre in Ghajnsielem, and the Sannat special school. At the psychiatric hospital at tal-Ibragg, OTs treat in and outpatients; home visits and social, leisure and recreational activities, both inside and outside the hospital, also form part of the rehabilitation programme.

For many years, OT service delivery in Gozo depended mainly on a rotational system by Maltese therapists crossing over on a daily basis, not without inherent difficulties. However, the Gozo department is now being run mainly by permanent staff resident on the sister island, resulting in a more significant continuity of service.

OT Education

The **Malta OT School** was inaugurated at St. Luke's Hospital in 1984, and from 1987, a steady stream of locally qualified OTs has graduated to help expand the service in the major health areas. Initially under the aegis of the Department of Health, then of the Institute of Health Care, the local course was recognised by the World Federation of OTs. The original **Diploma qualification** has now been upgraded to a **BSc course**.

OT Association

The **Malta Association of OTs (MOAT)** was set up in 1985 to promote the profession. It serves as a platform for OTs and organises, among other things, study mornings and a **National OT Day**. The MAOT is also concerned with continuing education, ethical issues and linking up with other OT Associations overseas.

Conclusion

From a simple start 25 years ago, the OT profession has steadily progressed to the position of an essential member of the treatment team. It should also be mentioned that in many facilities, OTs have been greatly assisted by technical staff whose expertise and adaptability have been indispensable to this progression. The present, as well as the way ahead, are not without difficulties: there are problems of professional identity, of overlap with other professions and lack of staff. But positive and stimulating challenges beckon too, among which care in the community is a priority.

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