

PROMOTING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN TUNISIA

A number of countries, which only have a small number of Occupational Therapists, or in which an OT service is non-existent, are becoming more aware of the need to either expand or introduce the profession. With this objective in mind, the Ministry of Social Affairs in Tunisia recently organised an OT Awareness and Promotion Week between 7 - 12 November 1994.

Four overseas guests were invited to participate in the week of conferences, meetings, and visits to various medical facilities. These were:

- *Mrs. Barbara Tyldesley, President of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists, and Deputy Director of the Liverpool College of OT.*
- *Mr. Martin Booy, Director of the Welsh School of Occupational Therapy in Cardiff.*
- *M. Michel Jacques, one of the coordinators of the OT College at the Ecole d'Etudes Sociales et Pedagogiques at Lausanne, Switzerland.*
- *The author of this article.*

Joseph Busuttil, Dip. OT., MSc.,
Senior Occupational Therapist,
Mount Carmel Hospital

Background

Tunisia has a population of 8 million people, with an Arab culture strongly influenced by a French connection. Being an industrial as well as an agricultural country, injury and disability problems abound, with acute rehabilitation needs. However, while other members of the interdisciplinary team are numerous, only three OT's are to be found in the country.

Recently, the Tunisian medical authorities, prompted by the efforts of the senior OT, Fethia Meziou Desai, embarked on a programme aimed at increasing significantly the OT staff, with the initial step being the setting up of an OT school. This was the main objective of the Ministry of Social Affairs in organising the OT Awareness and Promotion Week.

The Programme

A number of visits to rehabilitation facilities was organised; each visit featured a tour of the establishment, a briefing on the provisions, and lectures by the OT guests. The places visited included:

- The Kassab Orthopaedic Centre
- The Institute of Health and Work Safety
- The Allied Health School
- The Razi Psychiatric Hospital
- The Khaznadar Cerebral Palsy Centre

Several meetings were also held with:

- The Secretary of State for Social Welfare, Dr. Kamal Hadj Sassi.
- The Director of the Institute for the Promotion of the Handicapped, Dr. Souad Jomni.
- The Social Affairs Committee on Rehabilitation.

The Climax

The highlight of the programme was the O.T. Promotion Day, held at the Diplomat Hotel in central Tunes. Well attended by various personalities and delegated from the medical and allied professions, the day conference provided the ideal platform for expanding OT aims and benefits onto fertile soil. With their varied background and experiences, the four OT guests gave an added stimulus to the significant local contributions.

Mrs. Tyldesley opened the proceedings by a welcoming address as WFOT President. She praised the efforts being made in Tunisia to develop OT further. She later made a lecture on pain management, the OT role in this field, and the work carried out at the Liverpool Pain Clinic.

Mr. Booy dwelt on innovate curriculum aspects recently introduced at the Welsh OT College, with emphasis on new teaching and learning techniques, like problem based learning, the problems students and staff face in such an environment, and how to deal with change.

M. Jacques spoke on the role of the OT as therapist and consultant. Quoting Swiss examples, he explained the OT involvement with a major enterprise in which staff were suffering from backpain. Regarding the environment, M. Jacques expanded on how OT's, together with architects and engineers, worked on a new design for ticket booths used by normal and disabled people. As to legal aspects, Swiss OT's are consulted in the drawing up of the medical reports in cases of litigation where a proportion of dysfunction and disability has to be established.

The author talked on the relationship between OT and various branches of medicine, including psychiatry. He also detailed the major steps involved in setting up an OT school, drawing on his experiences in Malta and Jordan.

Conclusion

It is always an exciting prospect to share one's knowledge and experience and help other countries to develop one's profession. The Tunisian OT Promotion Week was a stimulating event as well as a challenge: in some quarters one found a warm welcome for the OT educational plan; in others one could feel a certain sense of guarded apprehension, as some members of other professions viewed such a step as a threat. More work is needed to allay such unfounded fears - all OT's stressed that we work as members of an integrated interdisciplinary team.

Besides contributing to the national OT plans in Tunisia, one also acquired a tremendous amount by working in close proximity for a period of time with other experienced colleagues in the OT field. One also hopes that this initial impetus will eventually lead to Tunisia joining the WFOT ranks as a full member with a fully functioning academic and clinical OT service.