

Sustainable Health Review Submission



Occupational Therapy Australia - WA Division

October 2017

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) Western Australian (WA) Division welcomes the Government of Western Australia's Sustainable Health Review and commends its proactive consultative process.

Occupational Therapy Australia is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists (OTs) in Australia. The WA Division supports our members within Western Australia and provides local representation on advocacy and lobbying issues.

As of June 2017 there were more than 2,500 registered occupational therapists working across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in Western Australia. Occupational therapists are allied health professionals whose role is to enable their clients to participate in meaningful and productive activities.

Occupational therapists assist clients to attain and maintain independence, lessening their reliance on welfare and health systems. They also strengthen communities by promoting and facilitating the social inclusion of clients with disability, illness and impairment who would otherwise be less able to contribute to these local communities. In so doing, occupational therapists help reduce costs to the community, and higher personal satisfaction levels among clients.

Occupational therapists provide services across a range of primary health and community settings such as physical and mental health therapy, vocational rehabilitation, chronic disease management, assessments for assistive technology and home modifications, and key disability supports and services. They are skilled across the continuum of health care including chronic disease, mental health, Aboriginal health, and rural and remote health.

In the development of this submission, OTA WA consulted members working within and external to the WA Health Department, seeking their concerns, experiences and opinions.

This submission will focus on four key recommendations which OTA believes would enhance the WA health system in a sustainable way.

Recommendation 1: Improved integrated and co-ordinated care from hospital to the community, utilising occupational therapists in care coordination roles.

Occupational therapists are highly skilled and uniquely trained, bringing a specific skill set to the care of clients. They offer a unique perspective, and are well placed to implement and coordinate the care of a range of individuals across the lifespan. An investment in a cohort of OTs in this space would significantly improve the integration of care between hospital and the community.

Occupational therapists adopt a holistic viewpoint, with a biopsychosocial approach and client centred care model. This unique approach supports the overall objective of integrating and coordinating care from hospital to community, facilitating a stabilisation, and eventual reduction, of health expenditure, and streamlining service provision for clients. As such, it represents a sustainable return on investment by the WA Department of Health.

*Reducing the Pressure on Hospitals*¹, a report on the value of occupational therapy in England, highlights the role occupational therapists can play in reducing hospital admissions and length of stay, and the influence OTs have on successful transition and discharge. The English report emphasises and details how occupational therapists not only reduced unnecessary transfers into both emergency departments and admissions, but also eased the patient journey and ensured timely, appropriate and safe discharge home. The report demonstrates that patients who receive help from an occupational therapist are likely to have better outcomes and unlikely to require rapid, costly and upsetting readmission.

Similarly, an independent review conducted in the United States, *Higher hospital spending on occupational therapy is associated with lower readmission rates* (Rogers, A. T., Bai, G., Lavin, R. A., & Anderson, G. F. 2016) found that expenditure on occupational therapy services was the only spending category with a direct and positive effect on hospital readmission rates.²

As there has been little research undertaken in Australia on the cost benefit of occupational therapy, it is necessary to reference such international research.

Occupational therapists are unique in that they are trained to work within both health and social care settings, and across mental and physical health. This experience and knowledge enables them to navigate care and support systems efficiently, liaise appropriately, and work effectively in multidisciplinary settings; they are the key workforce when it comes to reducing hospital-related pressures.

Whilst it is recognised that integration is essential, the focus must be on appropriate community supports. These systems are only truly effective when adequate outreach facilities and services are supported from within hospital departments. The focus needs to be on ensuring the patient has a seamless journey between and with all services; hospital, community and general practice. Occupational therapists are well placed to facilitate this.

Assisting clients to transition from the acute phase of illness or injury through the rehabilitation and recovery journey to wellness and function remains an innate aspect of occupational therapy, and warrants the inclusion of occupational therapy within primary, secondary and tertiary health care structures and services in WA. It is for these reasons that

¹ <http://cotimprovinglives.com/improving-lives-saving-money-reducing-pressure-hospitals/>

² <https://www.aota.org/Publications-News/AOTANews/2016/Occupational-Therapy-Reduces-Hospital-Readmissions.aspx> <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077558716666981>

OTA proposes occupational therapists play a leadership role in case management and coordination within the primary health setting, working consultatively with the medical team to streamline service provision and enhance efficiencies and optimise patient outcomes. The 'patient first' focus not only minimises wasteful expenditure but identifies the patient's key needs and wants in relation to their health and wellbeing; essentially increasing client motivation to pursue activities and strategies that optimise their health and wellbeing. Embedding occupational therapists as care coordinators will enable delivery of client-led services, optimise service delivery, improve cost efficiency, and generate more positive health outcomes from the micro 'client' level to the macro 'state' level.

Recommendation 2: Increased and innovative use of Telehealth, with a focus on improving utilisation across services and breaking down some of the barriers to ensure equal access to services and resources in non-metropolitan areas.

The use of Telehealth is well established in Western Australia and is widely used in some applications of therapy based service provision.

*Perspectives of rural carers on benefits and barriers of receiving occupational therapy via Information and Communication Technologies*³ (Gardner, Bundy & Dew, 2016) found that participants were willing to use technology equivalent to Telehealth to enhance their current access to therapy for their children when coupled with prior experiences with therapy and experience with technology. However, there is a high need for support, and families still required face to face access to OTs prior, during and between sessions.

OTA believes that the expanded use of Telehealth in WA will require greater investment in equipment within departments, appropriate equipment to staff ratios, enhanced training of staff, and adequate infrastructure including the integrity of connection. Even with such investment, it remains the case that the provision of occupational therapy services is not always suited to Telehealth. This need to consult with clients in their own environment is the reason occupational therapists incur higher travel expenses than other health professionals.

Retention of occupational therapists in rural and remote areas continues to be a challenge for WA Health. Vacant positions in both the acute and subacute settings in these areas have directly resulted in longer hospital stays for patients.

While OTA believes that greater use of videoconferencing is one potential solution to the problem of workforce shortages in remote areas, it is of course dependent on the accessibility of this technology and the computer literacy of clients. Additionally, there are times when face-to-face contact may be necessary in order to provide the best possible care.

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26809606>

Recommendation 3: Adequate allocation and investment in allied health staff professional development – time and funding.

OTA members regularly express concern about the difficulty involved in undertaking professional development activities. Taking time out from the workplace and inadequate resources within that workplace are cited as key obstacles. This has been particularly highlighted by individuals working within departments of Health WA.

Occupational therapists are required to undertake and provide evidence of 30 hours of continued professional development each year to maintain registration with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Occupational therapists working within the Department of Health WA are finding this increasingly difficult to achieve.

Occupational Therapy Australia urges the review to invest in advancing outreach mentoring and supervision for those with little or no access to professional development opportunities. Allied health professionals in these positions are often fulfilling generalist roles and it is imperative for the sustainability of this workforce that they are appropriately supported and resourced. This will help retain allied health professionals, enhancing their job satisfaction and ensuring greater stability of service in the regions where they work.

OTA is concerned that governments are withdrawing from their roles as service providers, particularly since the rollout of the NDIS and a conscious decision on the part of all governments that health care provision is to become more market driven. This is of particular concern to new graduates, as there is less support and supervision available than there was when OTs predominantly worked in government run services.

Occupational therapists in senior leadership roles within the health system offer a range of benefits. Their integrated knowledge, breadth and depth of skills, and their understanding of complex health conditions enable them to perform case management and care coordination roles. It is therefore regrettable that the numbers of senior occupational therapy roles in the public system is actually diminishing.

The Francis Inquiry Report 2013⁴ highlights the importance of consistent training and maintenance of quality standards as they correlate to patient safety and standards of performance. The report speaks to the importance of patient centred health care leadership.

Whilst it is understood that the Department provides significant resources for overall staff development, there appears to be an underinvestment of resources in the professional development of allied health staff. OTA recommends the review address this inequality and consider appropriate professional development resources for allied health teams.

⁴ <http://www.midstaffpublicinquiry.com/report>

Recommendation 4: The WA Government continue to seek recommendations and expert advice from peak bodies, such as Occupational Therapy Australia, WA Division, to assist in the reprioritisation and reshaping of the WA health system.

Embedding occupational therapists in leadership roles within primary, secondary and tertiary health services will enable the philosophy of client-centred care to form the foundation of all strategic decision making. No other health profession is better qualified, skilled or equipped to lead the change necessary to delivering efficiency improvements, stabilising health expenditure and delivering better outcomes for WA patients, particularly those with complex health conditions. The consultative and collaborative approach of occupational therapy complements government agendas to enhance societal inclusion and respect diversity, enabling the potential of all individuals to contribute tangibly to their community irrespective of health concerns.

With their clinical skills and a willingness to negotiate, advocate, facilitate and empower, occupational therapists can help effect the changes necessary to reprioritise and reconfigure the WA health system.

