

Sustainability Matters: Exploring WFOT's Guiding Principles on Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The environment (context of occupational performance) has always been a focus for occupational therapists. Recently, sustainability has become a key occupational therapy topic (Swedish Association of Occupational Therapists 2012, College of Occupational Therapists 2013).

Following the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2012) position statement on environmental sustainability, it is timely for WFOT to provide curricula guidelines in 'Sustainability Matters: Guiding Principles on Sustainable Development'. This addresses the relevance of sustainable development to human occupational performance, making it part of occupational therapy's professional scope.

It follows a wider global awareness of sustainability amongst health professions and governmental organisations, and the recognition that "climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century" (UCL-Lancet Commission 2009, p.1659) affecting all human populations.

Intended use

'Sustainability Matters' is intended to encourage thinking, discussion, and practice related to the reader's occupational therapy specialty. It does not provide definite answers.

Rather, it encourages people to develop awareness of the topic of sustainability, its effect on occupational performance, health, and well-being, and to develop educational and practice approaches that are relevant to their specific circumstances.

Aim

The aim of 'Sustainability Matters' is to guide the development of occupational therapy curricula that include education of occupational therapy practitioners, scientists, and students in:

- working with individuals and communities to encourage sustainable occupational performance;
- helping vulnerable individuals and communities adapt to the adverse effects of climate change (the severe result of unsustainable human occupational lifestyles) using occupation-based interventions;
- engaging in sustainable occupational therapy practice;
- conducting research on ways of practicing sustainably and encouraging occupational therapy clients to participate in occupations sustainably;
- and conducting research on ways of helping vulnerable people adapt to the adverse effects of climate change using occupation-based interventions.

Sensible strategies going forward should include:

- reducing the human carbon footprint by reducing consumption and switching to reliance on renewable sources of energy instead of fossil fuels
- strengthening communities so that they can respond to climate change
- managing population growth so as to ensure that the goal of sustainability is achieved

In 'Sustainability Matters' suggestions are provided about how occupational therapy can contribute to these three responses to climate change.

References

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Structure

Section 1 outlines the making of 'Sustainability Matters'. Section 2 explores the relationships between sustainability, occupation, health, and well-being; examines the ethical consequences of the effects of unsustainable lifestyles; and outlines the models of care through which sustainability can be operationalized (enablement, empowerment, engagement, and rehabilitation). Section 3 introduces the principles to guide incorporation of the topic of sustainability in occupational therapy. These are:

- dissemination of factual information about sustainability
- the concept of environmental sustainability and how it contextualizes approaches to sustainable practices, including mitigation and adaptation
- understanding of social sustainability
- attitudes, knowledge, and skills that constitute competences needed in order to promote sustainability through occupational therapy practice

The clinical, educational, and scholarship implications are examined for each principle. Finally, the role of the WFOT and member national organizations in promoting integration of sustainability issues is outlined.

Section 4 presents brief factual information that constitutes the background to the stated principles. Finally, section 5 summarises recommendations to educators, clinicians, scholars, and national organizations arising from the principles.

Conclusion

In developing these WFOT guiding principles, the vision is that occupational therapy can join the interdisciplinary effort to promote behaviour change to help humanity achieve sustainable living goals, and to ensure that the current generation does not threaten the survival and quality of life for future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987).

Occupational therapists are qualified to contribute meaningfully in this effort since peoples' occupational choices and subsequent occupational behaviours determine the sustainability of their lifestyles.