



What makes occupational therapy in Africa different?

Rosemary B Crouch

This is the question being asked by the members of the Occupational Therapy Africa Regional Group (OTARG), who have just published their first book on occupational therapy in Africa (Sherry 2010). Having their own opinion about the profession in Africa has been planned for a long time and says something very special about the occupational therapists that developed the profession in Africa. They work in a most dynamic way within the scope of the profession, despite the poverty-stricken circumstances in some of Africa and working with a lack of material and human resources.

An important aspect of their success is that the development of the education of occupational therapists in Africa has produced interventions that are culturally correct for the population for which the therapy is required. The development of OTARG has been pivotal to the development of the education of occupational therapists in Africa.

The concept of starting an Africa regional group of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists was conceived in Nairobi, Kenya, at the 22nd Council Meeting of WFOT in 1996. The inauguration of OTARG took place in Durban, South Africa, in 1996 and its development has continued strongly since these early days. There are currently 14 countries that are fully paid-up members. Congresses in the various African countries continue to strengthen both the impact of OTARG and the profile of occupational therapy within Africa. Congresses have been held in Mauritius, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Zanzibar and, most recently, in Malawi in 2008 and have been attended by delegates from all over Africa and from several countries worldwide.

The profession of occupational therapy was introduced to South Africa in the 1940s and formal education

commenced in 1952. Subsequently, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Uganda developed their occupational therapy programmes.

The formalisation of the profession in countries North-East of South Africa only really began in 1998, although there had been input from wonderful pioneering occupational therapists, such as Laurent in Mauritius, Grossman and van der Veen in Tanzania and Smyth in Uganda, long before that. The education of occupational therapists in Tanzania commenced in 1999 and, even more recently, in Mauritius in 2003 and then in Nigeria in 2008. Over the years, there has also been occupational therapy input in the French Western parts of Africa, including Rwanda, Burundi and Burkina Faso, and in other parts of Africa, such as Namibia, Ethiopia, Zambia, Mozambique and Malawi.

In these countries, there is a rich diversity of cultures, traditions and spirituality. As a result, this makes the profession of occupational therapy exceptionally exciting and there is a fertile ground for research, much sought after by the World Health Organisation. Occupational therapists have, over the years, needed to develop innovative coping mechanisms and adaptations to solve the many difficulties that exist. It is real occupational therapy, but it is not easy! It is, however, an example to the rest of the world.

If you want to find out more, the next OTARG Congress will be in Livingstone, Zambia, in September 2011. Please visit the OTARG website for details at www.otarg.org.za. Perhaps some of you might consider working in Africa for a time and contributing to these exciting developments.

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