

EVERYDAY STORIES



TOPIC EDITOR: NAOMI HAZLETT

Reflections: My journey into the evolution of the OTA/PTA role through open conversations

Jeena Parmar

Finding your passion can take you to many paths along a bumpy road. Recently, our hospital hosted a Health Disciplines recognition event at which I was the recipient of the Clinical Excellence Award. This award recognizes an individual who demonstrates excellence in practice and patient care, exemplary professional knowledge, and pride in her or his profession, and also promotes an atmosphere of collaboration and mentorship. It was an incredible honour, and it led me to reflect upon the journey I started years ago.

The beginning

I grew up in a small town in British Columbia, in a time when members of minorities faced tough challenges with labels and stereotypes; as a result, opportunities were at times difficult to find. I worked twice as hard as I felt I should need to, to prove myself to others. It was not until I had great mentors that I identified and navigated my path to self-discovery, realizing my full potential. I became a peer counselor, was valedictorian of my high school class, and received recognition for my contributions to the community during my post-secondary education.

Ever since I can remember, I always had the desire to help others. Like many children, at an early age, I imagined every possible response to the question, “What would you like to be when you grow up?” From options spanning from some type of superhero (specifically Wonder Woman®) to a neurosurgeon, my ideas all supported my purpose of making a difference. I had not realized that in considering this question, I was preparing a framework that would carry me to my present role as an occupational therapist assistant/physiotherapist assistant (OTA/PTA).

When I graduated from the rehabilitation assistant program 20 years ago, the profession was fairly new. At this time, the professional title of “rehabilitation assistant,” triggered questions across work environments, as the term was quite broad. Not many people knew that this role included physiotherapy and occupational therapy components, as well as a recreation therapy one. I found myself being more of a nursing assistant in hospitals, folding towels and cleaning equipment in physiotherapy and occupational therapy clinics. Though assisting clients with mobility and activities of daily

living, as well as doing inventory, were a part of the scope of rehabilitation assistants, there was insufficient understanding of what OTA/PTAs had to offer, and so we were not being utilized to our full potential. The role became more about completing tasks; therefore, the professional language and mechanisms that defined us were being lost, and patients were not receiving optimally holistic care. Everyone knew about physiotherapy, as it was more prevalent and concrete, but occupational therapy remained in the shadows. So, not only were we facing challenges around the understanding of two professions and how they complement each other, but also the understanding how the new role of an OTA/PTA fit in this relationship. It was difficult at first to promote the role of OTA/PTAs, as there were thoughts of this role taking away from the occupational therapists and physiotherapists. As a result, there was a sense of uncertainty about the responsibilities of OTA/PTAs. Shortly after I experienced the effects of these misunderstandings, such as decreased workload, skills not being fully utilized and seclusion from team collaboration. It became apparent how important it was to fill in gaps in knowledge through education and advocacy. Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Mandela, 2012, p. 101) and I was determined to use education to further promote my role.

Evolving through open conversations

In embracing change, I needed to make space for open conversations around defining the scope of practice of OTA/PTAs. Having a culture of open communication encourages and improves knowledge sharing in both formal and informal settings. Also essential to the successful exchange of ideas was aligning the conversations with my target audiences. I tried to ask myself how I could relate to my audience so that we could have discussions that were meaningful for everyone. Everyone does not have to agree, but the sharing of opinions begins a conversation that can lead to collaborative learning. Transforming a culture takes time and transparency. Demonstrating initiative in taking the first steps toward facilitating such conversations, I started to position myself in different environments to support these discussions. Examples



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of such environments included interprofessional team meetings, rounds, forums, seminars, councils, focus groups, quality improvement meetings, and other projects. As a result of these open conversations, my colleagues and I started to see OTA/PTAs in various health care settings across the province under the direction of occupational therapists and physiotherapists. Over time, I had worked in pediatrics, outpatient psychiatry, long-term care, rehabilitation, various clinics, acute care, transitional care, and neurology. For me, this broad scope of practice was very exciting, as it allowed me to be a part of two growing professions that work closely together in multidisciplinary teams. Though the roles of occupational therapist and physiotherapist have their own distinctive identities, it has become more evident over time on how everyone involved with these fields plays an important role in health care, working toward a common goal—excellence in patient care.

Being a leader

As an OTA/PTA, I have had the pleasure of also being a preceptor and clinical instructor. Over the years, I have worked with many levels of students, and it is still so exciting to see their enthusiasm for the profession. Teaching, however, came with challenges at the beginning. I still find some students struggling with integrating occupational therapy concepts into their treatment plans. I asked myself: How do I facilitate this integration so that it becomes as a part of students' observations and critical thinking? How do I guide them to "think outside the box" without providing all the answers? These were challenges for me as a new instructor. By seeking out the assistance of my occupational therapy practice leader, I was able to implement the best approach—and I quickly learned that there is no universal "best approach." Students each have their own learning styles they use to achieve their goals, which differ from mine. Becoming more familiar with my

target audience and getting more comfortable with adapting my way of delivering information has promoted an effective teaching environment, supporting success for myself, the students, and for patients and their families. In some cases, the student became the mentor and the instructor the mentee—the relationship between the mentor and student is a special one. Occupational therapy has become an integral part of OTA/PTA students' learning goals during placements, and increased awareness provides more opportunities for this profession to demonstrate its importance. By disseminating knowledge across various clinical settings, preceptors and students have played a significant role in bridging knowledge gaps, through demonstrating leadership and working together to make a difference.

My journey would not be complete without those who have inspired me to continue to make a difference. I have been very lucky to have been part of amazing collaborative teams throughout my career; my colleagues have challenged me to attain my full potential and develop into a confident leader. I have always enjoyed open conversations with diverse team members, as they create an atmosphere that fosters teaching, learning, and awareness. Without these mentors, I would not be the person who I am today.

Becoming a leader in my profession has transpired not only through hard work, self-reflection, and guidance, but also through surrounding myself with people who believe in me... especially my mom. She was a true warrior, never lost hope, was always there for others, and found the positive in all that surrounded her. Sadly, she passed away a few years ago following a courageous battle with metastatic breast cancer. I derive my values, beliefs, and strength from her, which I bring to my work every day.

Future outlook

I am so excited to see what the future holds for the OTA/PTA role. Through sharing our ideas and having open conversations, there is so much we can accomplish together as health care professionals. We must see obstacles as opportunities to keep moving forward as our journey continues.

Reference

Mandela, N. (2012). *Notes to the future: Words of wisdom*. New York, NY: Atria Books.

About the author

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Editor's note

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