



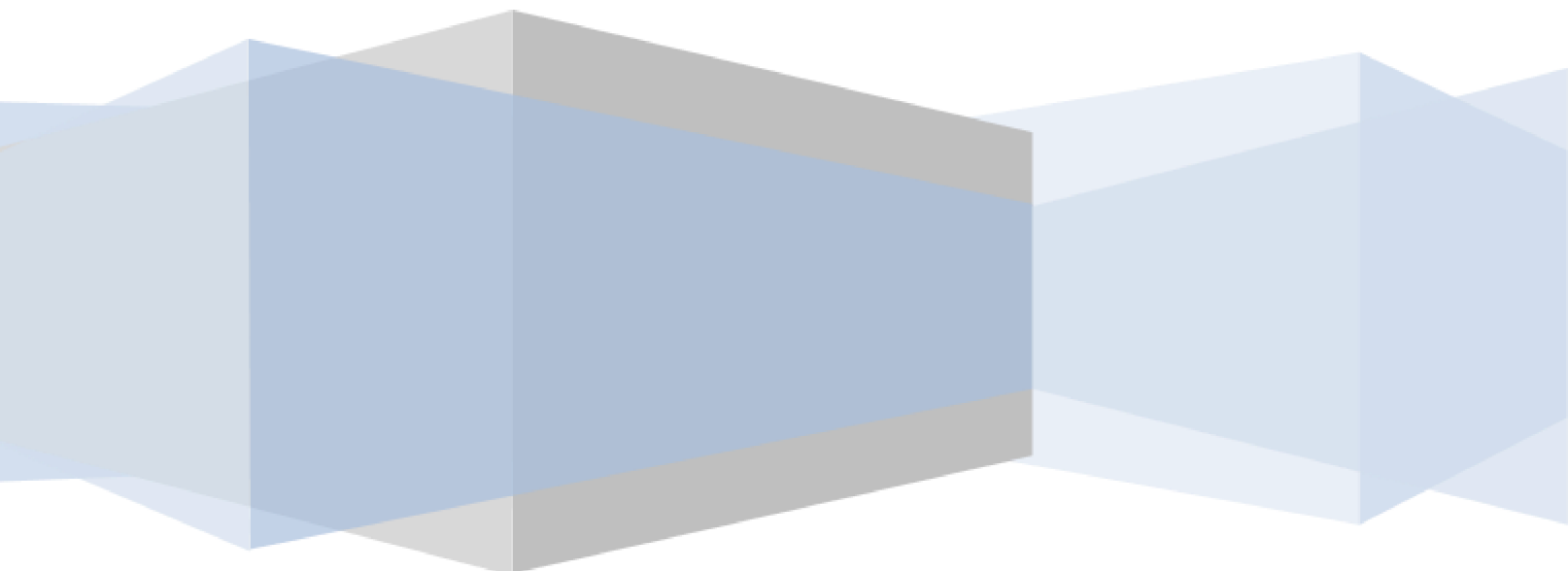
Saskatchewan Society of
Occupational Therapists

The Labour Market for Occupational Therapists in Saskatchewan

Position Paper

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October 2017



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Introduction

For over fifty years, occupational therapists have advocated for a stable and reliable supply of occupational therapy services in Saskatchewan. Other Canadian provinces have demonstrated that offering provincially-based occupational therapy educational programs enables a stable supply of occupational therapists within their jurisdictions. A Saskatchewan-based educational program would allow students to be educated within their home province, thus facilitating recruitment and retention. A university program would act as a resource for continuing development of the profession and would facilitate provincially relevant evidence-based research. In 2015, the Saskatchewan Government's Ministry of Advanced Education and the Ministry of Health commissioned a study to review the supply and demand for occupational therapists. Members of the Saskatchewan Society of Occupational Therapists (SSOT) were asked to provide information to the researcher. In March 2016, the *Labour Market for Occupational Therapists in Saskatchewan* (LMOT) was submitted to the government. SSOT wishes to acknowledge the Saskatchewan Government for commissioning this review and all the individuals and organizations who volunteered their perspectives in contributing to this research.

Purpose of this Position Paper

This paper is intended to inform those with an interest in ensuring that Saskatchewan residents have access to quality health care services and may not be aware of the LMOT or the Government's response to it. As a professional entity, SSOT supports the continuing competence of its members and promotes awareness of occupational therapy services. As a regulatory body, SSOT is legislated to protect the public and ensure the provision of quality occupational therapy services. Therefore, it is in the public's interest that SSOT share the impact of this report which has highlighted the current inadequacies of occupational therapy services in Saskatchewan.

Findings of The Labour Market for Occupational Therapists in Saskatchewan

In July 2016, the LMOT was made public. The writer of the report hoped it would

“ . . . encourage evidence-based policy development by providing a common set of understandings about the current situation within which further discussions and policy decisions can be made.” (LMOT, p.2). (<https://www.sasktrends.ca/LabourMarketReportForOccupationalTherapists.pdf>).

This report confirmed what SSOT and others have been indicating for years:

- **There is a lack of understanding of the value of occupational therapy (p. 50)**
- **Saskatchewan has a scarcity of occupational therapists. It has the lowest per capita coverage for occupational therapy services among the provinces and needs a minimum of 130+ additional occupational therapists to be on par with the national average (p.15)**
- **Burnout is a high-risk factor within this workforce (p. 33)**
- **The scope of practice in Saskatchewan is limited due to the scarcity of occupational therapists (p. 3)**
- **On average, the annual return rate on seats purchased from educational programs outside of Saskatchewan is approximately 50% (p. 29)**
- **Occupational therapists in Saskatchewan are younger, less experienced and more mobile than their colleagues in other parts of Canada. (p. 26)**
- **Relatively few occupational therapists are employed in the mental health field compared to other provinces (p. 3)**
- **The demand for occupational therapy services will increase over the next 5 to 10 years (p.48)**

The writer of the Report concluded:

“There seems to be a disconnect between the demand for the services that are provided by occupational therapists and the demand for occupational therapists. That is the need for the kinds of services provided by occupational therapists is apparent and increasing but there is no evidence that this has translated into a significant demand for occupational therapists.” (LMOT, p. 50).

“Occupational therapists are one of the health care professionals that could help the provincial Ministries implement a number of policies and strategies such as the disability and mental health/addictions strategies and the goal of reduced surgery wait times.” (LMOT, p. 3).

SSOT’s Response to the Perspectives Shared by the Representatives from the Ministries of Advanced Education and Health

Following the release of the LMOT report, SSOT representatives met with representatives of the Ministries of Advanced Education and Health in July 2016. The Ministry representatives remained satisfied with the status quo and did not acknowledge that our current statistics were of concern. They perceived that the current agreement of purchased seats from the University of Alberta has led to a stable and sufficient supply of occupational therapists in Saskatchewan. Reasoning for this opinion was as follows:

- 1) **The occupational therapy workforce levels are satisfactory. They highlighted that the number of occupational therapists has grown more rapidly than any other Saskatchewan group of health care workers and is double the rate of nurses.**

SSOT’s response:

Statistics relating to the rate and amount of expansion of the occupational therapy workforce in comparison to other groups is irrelevant. Comparisons between different groups of health care professionals do not provide evidence that a need has been addressed, since each group is distinct with different roles.

- 2) **Provincial vacancy rates in April 2016 were at 1.4%, indicating that the current supply met the demand for occupational therapists.**

SSOT’s response:

- Vacancy rates fluctuate greatly over the course of the year
- Given that 88% of Saskatchewan occupational therapists are women, vacancies related to maternity leaves are a constant consideration for employers
- Urban centers tend to have lower vacancy rates. These are sought-after positions as occupational therapy departments are larger, have more staff, and provide more opportunities for professional development and mentorship.
- Rural centers are chronically understaffed and occupational therapy positions are often vacant, on average 20% (LMOT, p. 4)

3) **Maintaining the status quo will meet current and future provincial needs for occupational therapy services.**

SSOT's response:

Maintaining the status quo ignores three key points:

- Saskatchewan needs an extra 130+ occupational therapists today to attain resource levels comparable to the rest of Canada.
- That Saskatchewan needs to increase its occupational therapy workforce just to keep pace with population growth.

“The number of occupational therapists would have to increase by 3 – 4 persons per year to maintain our per capita number of occupational therapists.” (LMOT, p. 48).

- An aging demographic will increase the demand for occupational therapists. Failure to recognize this growing need is short-sighted.

4) **Ministerial representatives stated that other Saskatchewan health care workers perform the roles traditionally held by occupational therapists in other provinces; therefore, there is no gap in services available to Saskatchewan residents.**

SSOT's response:

Occupational therapists are regulated health professionals in Saskatchewan and in each province across Canada. Legislation protects the public from poor practice through a formal complaint process and ensures that occupational therapists deliver quality services.

“Regulated occupations are in place to protect the health and safety of Saskatchewan people and provide consumer protection. Regulations ensure that those working in specific occupations meet the required standards of practice.” January, 2017.

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/moving-to-saskatchewan/immigrating-to-saskatchewan/working-in-saskatchewan/regulated-occupations-and-licensing-requirements>

By stating that other professionals can do the work of occupational therapists, Saskatchewan residents' lives are placed at risk. Some examples of duties that occupational therapists perform to reduce risk and prevent harm include:

- **Home assessments for falls prevention and safety:**
 - occupational therapists evaluate their client's abilities and duties within their home and address any challenges or danger through the recommendation of equipment or alternative ways to perform the duties safely.

- **Swallowing and feeding assessments to prevent choking and support eating:**
 - occupational therapists understand the physiological, social, emotional and cultural aspects involved in feeding and swallowing. They help those with feeding challenges, due to disease, disability or under-development, by offering guidance for proper positioning, specialized utensils, and techniques so that clients can participate in mealtimes.
- **Prevent pressure sores for clients with limited mobility:**
 - occupational therapists recommend cushions or coverings to alleviate pressure points and teach clients and caregivers how to modify daily activities to prevent pressure sores from developing.
- **Evaluate the client's capacity for safe driving after an injury or disease:**
 - occupational therapists understand the many complex factors involved in driving and how one's capacity to drive safely may be affected after an injury or illness. Saskatchewan Government Insurance (SGI) recognized this skill set and added occupational therapists to their list of qualified medical practitioners. Since 2012, occupational therapists have been required to report any clients whose conditions could impact their ability to drive safely. They also work with individuals to improve driving safety through the recommendation of adaptive equipment, skills training and/or health promotion initiatives, such as CarFit, a safety program presented in partnership with SSOT and the Canadian Automobile Association of Saskatchewan.
- **Provide treatment for post-surgical patients to prevent re-injury:**
 - occupational therapists teach post-surgical patients how to perform their daily routines, such as dressing, toileting and work tasks, without impeding the surgical results. Through task-modification, use of assistive equipment and strength building movements, patients regain their independence and skills. Without such intervention, patients risk re-injury, dependence upon others or inability to return to work.
- **Teach self-regulation strategies for those who experience emotional extremes, such as disabling anxiety or angry outbursts:**
 - occupational therapists understand the physical, emotional, psychological and environmental factors that lead one to feel dis-regulated, or "out of control." They help clients recognize their self-regulation needs and teach strategies to allow the individual to function at home, work, or at school.

Occupational therapy is the **only** profession that focuses on **enabling occupation**. Occupation can be defined broadly as performing the tasks the client needs or wants to do in their daily life. As portrayed in the examples above, occupational therapists:

- Determine the client's strengths and challenges
- Assess the demands of the task
- Consider the physical, social and cultural environment in which this occupation, or task, occurs
- Enable independence and improve function in the client's daily life

The ability to structure client success through this complex interplay between person-occupation-environment develops first through graduate-level education, then through supervised student practicums, and lastly from ongoing commitment to evidence-based practice. To suggest that other professions can satisfy a client's needs in the same fashion as an occupational therapist is incorrect and indicates a lack of understanding of the role and scope of occupational therapy. When other professionals perform the duties traditionally performed by occupational therapists, their interventions do not consider the same client-centered elements in a comparable manner, therefore placing Saskatchewan residents at risk for lesser quality outcomes.

5) **Purchasing seats from educational programs outside the province meets Saskatchewan's health human resource needs in occupational therapy.**

SSOT's response:

At our meeting in July 2016, the Saskatchewan Government representatives indicated that the agreement to purchase seats at the University of Alberta was extended until 2021. This **directly contradicts** the intention expressed by the Minister of Health eight years ago, when he expressed support and urgency about developing a provincially based occupational therapy educational program.

"We're very supportive of this program [OT] moving forward as fast as it possibly can...for many reasons and one of them being the shortage of occupational therapists...and we don't train any in our province, so we need to start...we want to see this move ahead as quickly as possible."

(Don McMorris, Saskatchewan Minister of Health, March 2009, p.535 Hansard).

One year later this intended plan of action was supported by the Minister of Advanced Education.

"The aim is to have the program in place as part of the School of PT in 2012...certainly the proposal [for the University of Saskatchewan], as I have seen it makes sense."

(Rob Norris, Saskatchewan Minister of Advanced Education - Star-Phoenix, November 19, 2010).

Conclusion

The 2016 *Labour Market for Occupational Therapists in Saskatchewan* clearly articulates that maintaining the current number of occupational therapists will not meet the current and projected future needs of Saskatchewan residents. In contradiction to statements made in previous years by the Saskatchewan Ministries of Advanced Education and Health, there is no plan to change the current approach to the supply of occupational therapists. The status quo will be maintained despite the knowledge that the current level of occupational therapy resources in Saskatchewan is well below the standard for the rest of Canada.

SSOT continues to stress that ***timely attention to the supply of occupational therapists is of critical importance***. As part of our commitment to ensure that quality occupational therapy services are available to Saskatchewan residents, we share this information with those who are affected by the inadequacy of occupational therapy services. We encourage those impacted to voice their concerns and outline the costs associated when access to the service is delayed or denied.