



Saskatchewan Society of Occupational Therapists

**Continuing Competency Foundational Document:
Definitions, Purpose, Assumptions and Guiding Principles**

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Introduction:

The provincial government has given the Saskatchewan Society of Occupational Therapists (SSOT) the responsibility to regulate the practice of occupational therapy in Saskatchewan and requires that it do so in the public's best interest. SSOT needs to ensure that therapists demonstrate the essential competencies for safe, ethical and effective practice:

- when they enter practice, and
- that they maintain these competencies throughout their career.

A continuing competency program fulfils the latter function.

Professional organizations provincially, nationally and internationally now recognize that re-registration requirements such as number of practice hours or accumulation of continuing education credits do not sufficiently demonstrate competency. Most are developing or revising continuing competency programs to better demonstrate accountability to the public.

This document provides the foundation and establishes a framework for SSOT's continuing competency program. It does not describe the actual program, but establishes how on-going decisions will be made about the components and processes used in the program. There will be periodic consultation with members as the program is designed. By-laws will be developed to govern the process and ensure that the therapist's privacy is respected. Bylaws will also be developed to ensure the information remains confidential and used only for the purpose outlined by the program.

Definitions:

Competency means that the therapist demonstrates the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviour described in the *Essential Competencies of Practice for Occupational Therapists in Canada* (2nd Edition, June 2003)¹.

Continuing competency refers to a therapist's ongoing ability to practice safely, ethically and effectively within his/her defined scope of occupational therapy practice, as self-awareness and knowledge of best-practice changes, keeping in accordance with the *Essential Competencies*.

A **Continuing Competency Program** is a systematic set of processes, tools and methods whereby SSOT supports therapists in maintaining or enhancing competency and periodically confirms that a therapist is maintaining his/her competency.

Purpose of a Continuing Competency Program:

This program will assist therapists to achieve, and to continue achieving beyond, a minimum level of competence as is outlined in the *Essential Competencies of Practice for Occupational Therapists in Canada* (2nd Edition, June 2003)¹. The implementation of this program will allow individual occupational therapists to become aware of and periodically demonstrate their competency, maintaining the privilege of being licensed as an occupational therapist in the province of Saskatchewan.

Assumptions:

About Competency

- 1) Therapists develop and demonstrate the required competencies to enter practice through successful academic preparation at an accredited institution, fieldwork experiences and examination processes.
- 2) During their career, occupational therapists maintain and enhance their competence through on-going learning applied to their practice. The method, amount and content of learning may vary, based on the OT's background, learning style and learning needs within their practice setting.
- 3) Many therapists pursue and achieve excellence in their area of practice beyond that which is described in the *Essential Competencies* document. Other therapists may not maintain their competence adequately. Therapists may or may not be aware of their own level of competency. The objective of the program is not proficiency beyond that described in the *Essential Competencies* document, though the tools used to demonstrate competence may capture and encourage proficiency.
- 4) While many therapists pursue and achieve excellence, it is recognized that excellence in one area does not compensate for weaknesses in another area of competency. Though some competencies are more difficult to accomplish in certain contexts, all of the *Essential Competencies* are equally important and obligatory. Therapists are expected to demonstrate an acceptable level of competency in each of the *Essential Competencies* as it applies to their specific scope of practice.
- 5) Therapists who do not actively pursue continuing competency may fall behind as the profession advances. Gaps may develop with or without the therapist's knowledge.

About Obligations

- 6) The primary responsibility and associated costs to maintain competency rest with the therapist. Employers may support therapists' competency maintenance and development efforts. However, therapists must maintain competence regardless of the level of employer support.
- 7) SSOT has an obligation to the public to ensure that occupational therapists maintain their competence throughout their practice. SSOT currently has mechanisms in place to ensure public safety. A continuing competency program supports these mechanisms, but does not directly monitor public safety.
- 8) As a self-regulating profession, SSOT Council (a group of elected peers and government-appointed public representatives) is responsible for decisions about acceptable levels of competence and whether or not an individual therapist has demonstrated these levels of competence.

Guiding Principles:

These principles have been developed through review of current best practices and consultation with membership. They will be used to guide the choices SSOT must make about the design and implementation of a continuing competency program.

- 1) **A way to support competence.** The continuing competency program will be designed to support therapists in understanding, applying and demonstrating the *Essential Competencies*. The tools selected will help therapists identify ways in which they can demonstrate competency. The program will not be punitive in nature, but will provide feedback. This feedback may validate practice and/or provide guidance. When necessary, an appropriate amount of structure to support enhancement of practice will be provided.
- 2) **Competency is dynamic. It's about *how you practice*.** The program will require therapists to demonstrate that they understand and integrate the *Essential Competencies* into their practice using systematic reasoning and processes. It will focus on patterns of practice and decision-making rather than on single clinical decisions.
- 3) **Public Protection is crucial.**
 - a. When components of occupational therapy practice are identified as posing higher risk to the public, the continuing competency program will focus attention and resources on these areas.

Examples of this might be the consent process or supervision of support personnel.

- b. If any categories of practitioners (e.g. by demographics, geography, scope of practice) are identified to be at a higher risk for competency gaps compared to the whole profession, the program will focus attention and resources on these practitioner categories.

4) Competency for all. Occupational therapists in all membership categories that include the privilege to practice will be required to participate in the continuing competency program, except for those with a restricted license. (*Note: Therapists with a restricted license are in the process of demonstrating competency through supervised practice.*)

5) There's more than one "right" way to do things. Occupational therapists maintain competence in diverse ways and practice in diverse settings. It is the individual therapist's responsibility to understand and apply the *Essential Competencies* of practice and to demonstrate that they do so within their practice. The Continuing Competency program, while based on common processes and tools, will have sufficient flexibility to accommodate a wide range of practice settings.

6) Competence only. The program will focus on verifying that individual therapists demonstrate the *Essential Competencies*, not on the demonstration of excellence. Some therapists may choose to use the tools to help in their pursuit of excellence.

7) Creating a responsible, sustainable program.

- a. **Quality:** The program will be based on best practices in the field of continuing competency programs. Validity and reliability of methods and tools will be considered. Since this is a developing field of knowledge, the program will initially be based on the best available information and it will be evaluated and improved over time.
- b. **Balance:** The program will be designed to accomplish its objectives as simply as possible with minimal intervention. It will inconvenience the therapist only when justified and necessary.
- c. **Fiscal Responsibility:** The program will balance the demands for public protection and the costs associated with implementing best practice with the resources available.
- d. **Communication and Confidentiality:** The continuing competency program will require an exchange of information and feedback between SSOT and the therapist. SSOT will ensure there is

appropriate legal protection for information provided by therapists within the program. Therapists will be advised of confidentiality provisions.

- e. **Fairness:** Competency assessment and decision-making processes will be clearly defined and transparent. Therapists will be given reasonable opportunity to provide information before decisions related to their competency are taken.

Frequently Asked Questions

I thought SSOT was a professional association that advocated for the occupational therapy profession. What does continuing competency have to do with advancing the profession?

SSOT is established by provincial legislation to perform regulatory functions. The continuing competency program is part of SSOT's responsibilities to ensure that all Occupational Therapists practice safely, ethically and effectively in order to protect the public.

What is the difference between registration and a continuing competency program?

Therapists demonstrate competency at initial registration through meeting the educational and fieldwork requirements at an accredited institution (or equivalent requirements, for example for internationally trained graduates). Continuing competency programs require therapists to periodically demonstrate that they keep up to date with changes in the profession and continue to possess the competencies to practice. This can be linked to annual re-registration or may be a separate process.

What are some of the other ways in which SSOT protects the public?

SSOT also protects the public through the registration process, by developing and enforcing standards of practice and through the investigation and resolution of public concerns or complaints. Public Representatives also participate in decisions made by SSOT Council and Committees.

What are my employer's responsibilities to support me in maintaining my competency?

SSOT does not have any authority over employers and cannot establish expectations for employers. All therapists would be wise to advise their employer of their professional obligation to remain up-to-date and to maintain their competency. Employers generally share an interest in ensuring their employees are competent. Therapists could discuss their ongoing educational needs with their employers and negotiate directly for appropriate time or financial assistance in meeting these needs. Regardless of the employer's response, the therapist must act to maintain his/her competency.

How will the continuing competency program integrate with workplace evaluations?

The continuing competency program will be based on the *Essential Competencies*. There will likely be some overlap between these and workplace

evaluations. However, because SSOT cannot influence the content or frequency of workplace evaluations and because some OTs are self-employed, the continuing competency program will not be directly linked to workplace evaluations. Individual therapists may be able to use some information from performance evaluations when participating in the continuing competency program. Therapists may also be able to use their participation in the continuing competency program to contribute information for performance reviews.

How will areas of public risk be identified?

Areas of public risk related to occupational therapy practice will be identified through evaluation of the continuing competency program. Data will be gathered and analyzed in order to evaluate the program's effectiveness and to determine if there are any consistent public risk issues. Information from the literature and experience in other jurisdictions will also be considered.

How will SSOT make decisions about my competency? What happens if SSOT identifies that I have a competency gap or do not meet the continuing competency requirement in some way?

SSOT has not yet developed the by-laws that will govern this process. However, the guiding principles will be followed. SSOT will establish a fair and transparent decision-making process that will include an appeal process as required. Decision-making will not rest with any single individual. The process will likely include sharing the competency assessment results with the therapist and giving him/her an opportunity to respond. In most situations, following a competency assessment the therapist will simply be advised of opportunities to improve competency and SSOT will not need to monitor this. However, if significant competency gaps are identified, SSOT may identify how the therapist needs to improve his/her skills and require him/her to undertake the improvement and then demonstrate competence. The extent of the need to protect clients will govern decision-making.

How is competency assessment different from the process to investigate a complaint?

In a continuing competency program, there is no-one who has expressed a concern to which SSOT needs to respond. Continuing competency assessments should become routine procedures for all therapists. Unlike the complaints process, competency assessments will not focus on individual clients or incidents.

What if the OT peer(s) assessing me are influenced by previous information about me or contact with me?

SSOT will establish conflict of interest guidelines. Both the therapist(s) conducting an assessment and the therapist being assessed will have an opportunity to identify a potential conflict of interest.

What kind of support will SSOT provide in helping me maintain or enhance my competency?

SSOT will not provide financial support, but may be able to link you with appropriate resources. SSOT may provide some education that is relevant to all OTs (for example, education about the *Essential Competencies*).

¹ This document was distributed to all members of SSOT in June 2004 and subsequently to each new member upon registration. It articulates the standards of practice for OTs in Saskatchewan. If you do not have a copy, please contact SSOT.