



# Saskatchewan Society of Occupational Therapists

## Occupational Therapy Telepractice Guidelines

May 2020

### Occupational Therapy & Telepractice

**With recent increases for telepractice demand, availability, and usage, Occupational Therapists will need to continue to re-evaluate their service provision to ensure that their fundamental responsibilities are being met.**

Occupational Therapists (OTs) are increasingly using telepractice methods to deliver a wide array of occupational therapy services to clients. These clinical and non-clinical services from a distance may involve assessment, evaluation, intervention, monitoring, supervision, education, and consultation (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2014). Telepractice does not necessarily create a new or different occupational therapy service. Rather, it provides an alternate way to deliver existing services, while continuing to maintain the same standards and best practice as in-person services. The use of telepractice for health services has become more prevalent due to technological advances and availability along with stakeholder interest in alternate methods for efficient and effective health service delivery.

### Purpose of Guidelines

**Occupational Therapists must exercise their clinical judgement on a case-by-case basis when considering the use of telepractice, as they would with any other service or delivery model.**

These guidelines are intended to facilitate an understanding of the complexities of telepractice and encourage OTs that provide services in or from Saskatchewan to consider several factors when contemplating the use of telepractice in their service delivery. Although these guidelines cannot address all potential circumstances, they may be able to assist OTs with their clinical judgement and reasoning process in order to determine whether telepractice is an appropriate service delivery approach for their clients.

### Telepractice Terminology

**For the purposes of these guidelines, the term “telepractice” will be utilized to describe and refer to the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to deliver health-related services when the provider(s) and client(s) are in different physical locations. (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2014).**

Telepractice may encompass or relate to terms such as virtual care, electronic communication, online service delivery, telerehabilitation, tele-occupational therapy, teletherapy, telecare, teleconsultation, or telemonitoring.

### Telepractice Methods

**Telepractice technologies allow occupational therapists to provide service and to communicate with other health care providers and/or clients in a different location.**

Telepractice can be used as a stand-alone remote service delivery model or as a hybrid model where OT services are delivered through a combination of in-person treatment and technology-based services. OTs may utilize technology synchronously in real-time and/or asynchronously through the storage and sharing of data between the provider and the client. The method of using telepractice to provide occupational therapy services may also involve multiple individuals in communication with each other, including support personnel, other health care providers, and/or the client's family/caregivers.

### Telepractice Types

**Different types of telecommunication technologies can be utilized together in various combinations for different purposes in providing care via telepractice.**

Telecommunication technologies refer to “any emission, transmission, or reception of intelligence by any wire, cable, radio, optical, or other electromagnetic systems” (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2011). Information and data such as written text, images, and sounds may be transmitted through a variety of technology types including, but not limited to: telephone landlines, mobile devices, personal digital assistants (PDAs), interactive video and audio conferencing, e-mail, chat, text, internet (websites, blogs, social media), virtual apps, video games, web-based communication, wearable technology, facsimile, internet connection, computer information systems, remote monitoring, and telerobotics.

### Telepractice Benefits

**Telepractice can be used to improve and equalize access to occupational therapy services regardless of the physical location of the service provider and/or the client's physical location, medical condition, diagnosis, financial constraints, or other barriers to health care access.**

Telepractice may be used when in-person health services are not possible or practical, or to improve service access for all clients, particularly those in rural or remote locations. Technology can be used to overcome geographic distances in order to deliver services to clients while they remain in their home community. This can decrease unnecessary travel time and expenses for clients and service providers alike as well as promote continued participation and engagement in the client's life roles and responsibilities in their home community.

Telepractice can assist with connecting OTs to rural and remote areas that have a shortage of OTs available to provide services. Technology can increase health care productivity and efficiency as well as connect OTs to other health care providers and educational resources in order to promote competent practice. Occupational Therapists can use telepractice to optimize timely service delivery which could lead to reduced referral wait times. The potential for improved scheduling flexibility could result in an increase in communication frequency with clients for better continuity of OT service provisions and enhanced health outcomes. Other specialized services and health care providers may be readily accessed through telepractice to ensure optimal multi-disciplinary care for clients, particularly for those with complex care needs. As well, interpreters and family members/caregivers may be more readily accessible for the involvement of participating in telepractice sessions, which may increase health care effectiveness and efficiency.

### **OT Telepractice Obligations & Responsibilities**

**Occupational Therapists are expected to abide by the ethical, professional, and legal obligations and standards of practice when using telepractice as they would when providing services solely in-person.**

Saskatchewan Society of Occupational Therapists (SSOT) practicing and restricted license members are professionally responsible for all treatment and services rendered. OTs must continuously assess their professional and technical competencies when providing, or contemplating the provision of, telepractice services in their practice. When using telepractice as a service delivery model, the OT must remain informed of relevant and current changes to legislation, regulations, standards, policies, and procedures related to telepractice. Regardless of the use of telepractice, OTs in Saskatchewan are required to uphold the SSOT Code of Ethics and maintain standards of professional competency consistent with the Essential Competencies of Practice for Occupational Therapists in Canada 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. The standard of care delivered through telepractice must be equivalent to services provided in a traditional in-person setting. It is the Occupational Therapist's responsibility to ensure that all regulatory and employer obligations are met according to the requirements in their jurisdiction including, but not limited to the following:

- 1) Licensing
- 2) Professional Boundaries
- 3) Appropriate Telepractice Use
- 4) Telepractice Technology
- 5) Confidentiality, Privacy, & Security
- 6) Informed Consent for Telepractice
- 7) Risk Management
- 8) Documentation & Record Keeping
- 9) Continuing, Discontinuing, & Transferring Care
- 10) Advertising
- 11) Fees & Billing

## 1. Licensing

### Saskatchewan OT Jurisdiction

**Occupational Therapists must ensure that they meet all of the regulatory and registration/licensing requirements in jurisdictions where they provide telepractice services.**

SSOT has jurisdiction over OTs that are registered with SSOT and practice within the province of Saskatchewan. OTs that are located in Saskatchewan and provide telepractice services to clients geographically located in Saskatchewan must abide by the regulatory and legislative requirements for Saskatchewan. OTs geographically located outside of Saskatchewan must have a practicing license with SSOT in order to provide services to clients physically located in Saskatchewan.

### Jurisdictions outside of Saskatchewan

**Saskatchewan OTs must meet all of the regulatory and registration/licensing requirements in the client's jurisdiction prior to providing telepractice services.**

The client's physical location defines the jurisdiction for which the provision of OT service occurs, regardless of the OT's location. OTs must be aware of and apply practices that align with the legislative and regulatory requirements, professional standards of practice, and telepractice guidelines for the client's jurisdiction. OTs must contact the OT regulatory body in the client's jurisdiction to obtain relevant information and documents in regard to the regulatory and registration/licensing requirements for that jurisdiction. Note that the three northern Canadian territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut) currently do not have OT regulatory bodies.

OTs that provide telepractice services are responsible for ensuring that their liability/malpractice insurance policies include coverage for telepractice services in the jurisdiction(s) where they plan to provide services.

An OT that is registered in Saskatchewan is accountable to the Saskatchewan Society of Occupational Therapists (SSOT), even when they are registered in another jurisdiction and provide services to clients in that other jurisdiction. When an OT is providing services across jurisdictions and there are differing requirements and/or standards of care, the OT must abide to the highest requirements and/or standards.

The regulatory requirements for the provision of occupational therapy telepractice services by Saskatchewan OTs or to clients physically located in Saskatchewan are outlined in the chart below.

Regulatory Requirements for Providing Occupational Therapy Telepractice				
OT's Location	Client's Location	Registration Requirement	Legislation & Standards	Professional Liability Insurance
Registrant (SSOT practicing member) located in Saskatchewan	Client located in Saskatchewan	SSOT	Comply with the SSOT bylaws, policies & procedures, applicable legislation, and regulations	Liability/malpractice insurance coverage for a minimum of \$5 million.
Registrant (SSOT practicing member) located in Saskatchewan	Client located outside Saskatchewan	SSOT <b>and</b> Regulatory organization where client resides  Registration may be required in the jurisdiction where the client resides	Comply with the regulation, legislation, and standards of practice in Saskatchewan <b>and</b> the jurisdiction where the telepractice service will be provided. Clients must be notified of the location from which the OT is providing service and where they are registered.	Contact the regulatory body in the client's location to obtain the requirements for professional liability insurance. The OT should contact their own professional liability insurance carrier to ensure the appropriate coverage for providing telepractice services in other jurisdictions.
Registrant (SSOT practicing member) located outside of Saskatchewan	Client located in Saskatchewan	SSOT	Comply with SSOT Bylaws, applicable legislation, and regulations.	Liability/malpractice insurance coverage for a minimum of \$5 million.
OT from outside Saskatchewan (not already registered in Saskatchewan)	Client located in Saskatchewan	SSOT (OTs from outside Saskatchewan must have a practicing license with SSOT to provide direct client care in Saskatchewan through telepractice).	Comply with SSOT Bylaws, applicable legislation, and regulations. Clients must be notified of the location from which the OT is providing service.	Liability/malpractice insurance coverage for a minimum of \$5 million.

When an OT provides telepractice services to clients in other locations and/or jurisdictions, it is the responsibility of the OT to be aware of the local resources available (e.g. products, equipment, and other health care providers/services) and to provide appropriate and realistic recommendations and referrals to local supports based on the context and resources available.

**2. Professional Boundaries**

**Occupational Therapists must maintain the same professional boundaries as they would in an in-person therapist-client interaction.**

Telepractice has the potential to lean towards more informal interactions which can increase the time taken to build therapeutic relationships with clients, family members/caregivers, support personnel, and other health care providers. It is the OT's responsibility to ensure that the integrity and value of the therapist-client relationship remain comparable to an in-person interaction. It is suggested that the OT implement policies and procedures at the onset of service delivery with the client and others involved in their care to facilitate appropriate professional boundaries and parameters throughout the use of telepractice. It is also suggested that, when using video, the OT should ensure that environments are displayed appropriately and are aware of warning signs for boundary issues in order to manage them appropriately.

### 3. Appropriate Telepractice Use

**Occupational Therapists are responsible for using their professional judgement and clinical reasoning to consider the advantages, disadvantages, and risks of telepractice in order to determine if it is the most appropriate service delivery model to use for each individual client.**

Telepractice can be used to enhance an OT's practice or to provide OT services when in-person or alternate services are not possible, practical, or optimal. Each OT must use evidence-based decision-making when determining whether their services can be reasonably and safely delivered through telepractice technologies for each client and/or if in-person services are required. The OT should consider the following in their decision-making process for telepractice services for an individual client: client diagnosis/impairment, nature of OT services, client's ability to use and access technology, ethical considerations, client preference, potential distractions affecting treatment, technical personnel and supports, client's cognitive capacity, therapeutic needs, cultural considerations, and any other specific factors or circumstances related to the client. The OT must determine if it is appropriate to proceed with the use of telepractice services after confirming that the potential advantages and the client's interests outweigh the identified risks and disadvantages.

It is the responsibility of the OT to determine if the standardized assessment and/or treatment tools used in their practice are valid for virtual administration. Note that most standardized assessment and/or treatment tools and instruments were developed for in-person administration. Each OT must determine if these materials are appropriate for use through telepractice as well as understand the possible limitations of use and potential challenges associated with data interpretations due to the mode of delivery. OTs that utilize standardized assessments and/or treatment tools through telepractice must determine if modifications to the assessment/treatment environment are appropriate and can be achieved in order to preserve the reliability, validity, and integrity of the tool's psychometric properties. OTs must understand that assessment and/or treatment tools used through telepractice can lead to potentially different results as opposed to the in-person delivery of services.

### 4. Telepractice Technology

**SSOT cannot recommend or endorse any particular Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). OTs are responsible for determining which equipment and technology would be most appropriate to use in their practice setting, based on the capabilities and limitations of the technology.**

ICT should offer reliable, efficient, and high-quality audio and/or video to allow users to communicate effectively with each other in order to promote accurate, appropriate, and relevant health care decisions. It is possible that communication failures can occur at critical points during a client-therapist interaction when connectivity and/or bandwidth issues occur. Therefore, additional time, support, and ongoing training may be required for therapists and/or clients in

order to use and/or troubleshoot technology efficiently and effectively. The OT should be aware of where they can obtain resources and/or technical support in the event of technical difficulties.

The OT must have a basic understanding and level of competence related to the technology used for telepractice with their clients and are responsible for obtaining any training needed to operate the technology efficiently and effectively. The OT should also ensure that any support personnel and/or other health care providers that participate in the telepractice sessions have the knowledge, skills, supports, and abilities to operate the required technology.

The OT must ensure that technology used for telepractice is not only accessible to themselves and any support personnel, but also their clients, the client's family/caregivers, and any others involved in their care. The availability and access to certain technology, equipment, connectivity/bandwidth speeds, and other requirements may be limited for some clients, communities, and health care providers.

## **5. Confidentiality, Privacy, & Security**

**Occupational Therapists must identify, and reasonably manage, the risks associated with protecting client confidentiality, privacy, and security.**

The expectations for protecting the confidentiality and privacy of client personal health information for in-person services is the same when providing telepractice services. However, there are more challenges and risks to be aware of and to manage with telepractice services. The OT must take additional steps to be extra vigilant in protecting the client's personal health information when using technology tools and applications. OTs must ensure that their practices align with relevant legislation in the jurisdiction(s) where services are provided. OTs that provide telepractice services in Saskatchewan must comply with SSOT's requirements regarding the privacy, confidentiality, and security of client personal health information.

### **Secure Technology**

**Occupational Therapists must ensure that the programs, platforms, and equipment used for telepractice is safe and secure in order to protect the privacy of client personal health information while meeting the needs of access and usability.**

The OT must understand the fundamentals of their selected technological tools, and how they transmit, process, collect, record, and store personal health information. The OT should also be aware of any additional data recorded by the technology that they or the client would not have access to. OTs are encouraged to consult with a technology specialist to ensure the devices and systems they use have end-to-end security mechanisms and safeguards in place as a means to prevent breaches and/or the hacking of confidential and/or personal health information. OTs should acquire processes that allow for privacy protection such as utilizing password protection, secure networks

(firewalls with encryption), applying security setting features, and utilizing authentication for system/network access. OTs are encouraged to carefully review technology user agreements to ensure the applications and devices adhere to the provincial/territorial/national legislation where the services are provided. Systems provided by third-party payers and their agreements should also be reviewed to ensure compliance with legislative responsibilities. OTs should also inquire with the technology provider regarding the storage and protection of information and who has potential access to the health information.

### **Secure Environment**

**Occupational Therapists are responsible for implementing procedures in their physical environment to reduce the risk of possible theft, loss, tampering, interference, and unauthorized access/use.**

The physical environments of all locations where telepractice is utilized must be secure. The OT should ensure that people outside the service provision environment cannot access or overhear the content being shared. Observers and/or other participants in the delivery of care such as family, support personnel, and other health care providers must be identified and verified to ensure only appropriate persons are accessing and/or participating during telepractice services. The OT must obtain consent from the client to allow any additional participants and observers to be present during the telepractice sessions. When telepractice technology and equipment are not in use, the OT should ensure safe and secure storage of these items, e.g. keeping the items behind locked doors or locked down to prevent unauthorized use or access.

### **Inform Clients of Privacy Risks**

**Clients should be informed of the limits and risks to the client's privacy when using Information and Communication Technologies as well as the steps taken to safeguard their privacy.**

Occupational Therapists are encouraged to develop and/or adhere to their employer's privacy policies and procedures and discuss privacy risks associated with telepractice technologies with their clients in a transparent manner. Although the OT cannot guarantee that any technological communication can be fully secure, the OT should ensure that the client is comfortable with the measures taken to secure their privacy and confidential personal health information prior to proceeding with telepractice.

## **6. Informed Consent for Telepractice**

**Occupational Therapists are required to obtain informed consent from the client for the provision of services through telepractice, as they would for in-person interactions. The OT also needs to obtain the client's informed consent in a manner consistent with SSOT**

**Bylaws, SSOT Code of Ethics, Essential Competencies of Practice for Occupational Therapists in Canada 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, and SSOT Documentation Standards and Guidelines for Occupational Therapists. OTs providing services to clients in a different jurisdiction must be aware of the standards and legislation applicable to client consent in those areas.**

At the onset of telepractice services, the OT must verify the identity of the client. Local support personnel may be able to attend in-person at the client's physical location to assist with this process, if appropriate and applicable.

Prior to obtaining the client's informed consent for telepractice services, the OT should discuss and inform the client of the following:

- The OT should identify their name, physical location, work address, practice jurisdiction, area of practice, and training/education as applicable.
- The OT should explain that OTs are regulated health professionals and identify where they are registered/licensed.
  - The OT must confirm the identity and the physical location of the client receiving telepractice sessions to ensure that the OT is registered and licensed in the appropriate jurisdiction in order to provide services to the client. The client should be aware that they would need to inform the OT if they moved to a different jurisdiction.
- Identify the scope of practice that the OT can provide via telepractice and the benefits, advantages, limitations, and risks due to the service delivery method.
- Potential risks to the client for not receiving OT services through telepractice should also be discussed as well as any alternate service delivery options available in their community.
- Identify the specific technology and tools to be used during the telepractice services.
  - Explain how the client's personal health information will be transmitted and stored in a confidential and secure manner.
- The OT should explain how their telepractice services will be organized in terms of appointment times and duration. A process for appropriate and reliable communication between appointments should be identified.
- The OT must ensure that the client is aware that they have the right to revoke their consent and refuse, withdraw, or discontinue receiving and/or participating in OT services through telepractice at any time.
- Inform the client of the process and available organizations or persons they can contact if they have any concerns about the OT services being delivered through telepractice

Prior to engaging in OT telepractice services, the OT must obtain consent for the following:

- Proposed OT services to be provided through telepractice including assessment, treatment, and/or consultation.
- The collection, use, storage, transmission, and disclosure of the client's personal health information.
- Participation and/or observation by other health care providers, support personnel, and/or the client's family/friends/caregivers.

The OT must obtain informed consent from the client prior to changing or altering the OT service delivery methods, such as changing from in-person services to telepractice services or the use of a hybrid model. The OT should ensure continued consent for OT services from the client when utilizing telepractice as a service delivery model.

## **7. Risk Management**

**Occupational Therapists must identify and prepare for emergencies and adverse events prior to utilizing telepractice as a mode of service delivery.**

Although there are many benefits to telepractice, there are barriers and challenges to consider. The OT should advise clients about the processes and procedures in place for dealing with unexpected clinical, medical, technical, or environmental situations/interruptions. The OT must confirm the client's physical location and be aware of the local resources and contact information that would be required if an unexpected situation were to arise during OT service delivery. This could include, but is not limited to, the contact information for local emergency response, hospital/urgent care admissions, local resources, and the client's family/caregivers/support person(s).

## **8. Documentation & Record Keeping**

**Occupational Therapists must create and maintain client records in the same manner as in-person interactions in order to capture the care and methods of services delivered. SSOT members must engage in documentation practices and processes in accordance with the SSOT Documentation Standards and Guidelines for Occupational Therapists.**

In their documentation of telepractice services, the OT should describe the client verification/identification process as well as the verification/identification process for other health care providers, support personnel, and the client's family/caregivers involved in the session. The OT must document the client's informed consent for the proposed service delivery method as well as the discussion(s) regarding the client's understanding and acknowledgement that they are able to discontinue treatment at any time. The client record should include the rationale and factors considered in the decision to provide services via telepractice and the technologies utilized. The OT's and client's physical locations should be documented as well as the method of delivery and communication related to the

assessments and/or treatment interventions used during the telepractice session. The technology platforms and/or applications used during the telepractice session should be documented, along with the associated privacy and security measures implemented to protect the client's personal health information.

The OT should document any limitations and/or relevant factors that may have affected or lead to a different result when an assessment and/or treatment tool was completed through telepractice rather than in-person. The OT should acknowledge whether normative data was derived or based off of the administration of the tool through telepractice or in-person methods, if available and applicable.

The OT should ensure that the same obligations are met for clients and/or other health care providers in regard to health records access, as required, when delivering services via telepractice. Clients and other health care providers need to be informed of the process to access the health records/documentation, particularly when using telepractice methods provided by a third-party payer. OTs must ensure that contractual agreements with third-party payers comply with the regulatory and legislative requirements for the jurisdiction where services are provided, particularly with processes around documentation retention and ongoing access. OTs must be aware of any additional requirements regarding documentation and/or record keeping in the jurisdiction(s) where services are provided.

## **9. Continuing, Discontinuing, & Transferring Care**

**Occupational Therapists have the same obligations for follow-up, continuing, and transferring care whether the service delivery is through telepractice or in-person methods.**

When an OT uses telepractice alongside other health care providers, it remains important for the OT to inform the clients about the care the OT is responsible for and assist with clarifying the roles of others involved in their care, as needed.

If the OT and/or client decides that telepractice is no longer the appropriate or preferred method for service delivery, then the OT is responsible for ensuring continuation of services either through in-person services or by referring the client to another appropriate health care provider(s) in their local area in a timely manner.

## **10. Advertising**

**Occupational Therapists must understand and adhere to the relevant advertising regulations in the jurisdictions where they wish to advertise their telepractice services.**

## **11. Fees & Billing**

**Occupational Therapists should clearly communicate fair, equitable, and descriptive costs for telepractice services and associated fees prior to obtaining informed consent from the client.**

Clients should receive accurate information related to the OT services they can expect to receive through telepractice in return for the fees charged. All invoices and receipts for OT services delivered through telepractice should be transparent, comprehensive, and accurate in identifying how the services are/were delivered.

OTs should ensure that telepractice has been approved as an acceptable method for service delivery from employers and/or other funding sources (e.g. third-party payers) as well as understand their billing requirements prior to providing services to clients in this manner.

### **Acknowledgements**

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