

Occupational Therapy Canada: Embracing a shared vision to meet the occupational needs of Canadians

Andrew R. Freeman and Susan G. Rappolt

In Canada, we are lucky to have four national organizations working to advance the goals of the occupational therapy profession in the interests of the public: the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT), the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy University Programs (ACOTUP), the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations (ACOTRO) and the Canadian Occupational Therapy Foundation (COTF). As well, the Occupational Therapy Professional Alliance of Canada (PAC), recently renamed the Alliance of Canadian Occupational Therapy Professional Associations (ACOTPA), an informal alliance of the provincial and territorial professional associations, represents a critical sector of the profession. In recent years, given the considerable challenges that confront the profession, these organizations have recognized the importance of developing a collective voice to more effectively advance these goals. The purpose of this article is to present Occupational Therapy Canada (OTC) as the overarching collaboration of Canadian occupational therapy professional organizations. We will explain the origin of OTC and its goal of coordinating the roles and initiatives of the independent professional organizations in the common interests of supporting and advancing occupational therapy practice, services, research and education.

The lead-up to Occupational Therapy Canada

The professional organizations have been collaborating, in a progressively more formal capacity, for a number of years. However, the culmination of these efforts in 2012 represents an important new commitment to develop a common vision, the coordination of missions and the integration of intellectual resources. Although the precise name and terms of reference for our overarching national profession collaboration have evolved, a brief look back at the records reveals common threads that have influenced the development of this commitment.

While acknowledging a range of previous collaborative efforts on specific initiatives, at a more formal level, the *Occupational Therapy Professional Council* (OTPC) first convened in October 2006 with a representative from each of CAOT, ACOTUP and ACOTRO. As recorded in this meeting's minutes:

The purpose of the meeting was to develop a forum to discuss and work together among regulators, educators and CAOT on issues of mutual concern. It was noted that no previous mechanisms were in place for ongoing discussions between the three organizations. Past joint initiatives have been focused on specific initiatives between CAOT and individual organizations.

At this same meeting, the three organizations decided to invite COTF to participate as a member of this council.

At OTPC's next meeting in January 2007, the forum's name was changed to the *Occupational Therapy Council of Canada* (OTCC) and its terms of reference were established to "promote information sharing and coordinated action and planning on issues of mutual concern to further the development of the occupational therapy profession." The OTCC comprised the president or chair (or delegate) of ACOTRO, ACOTUP, CAOT and COTF, as well as the "representatives of other Canadian national occupational therapy organizations who could be invited to become members of the OTCC with the agreement of all existing member organizations."

Between this initial meeting of the OTCC and the formation of the OTC in June 2012, 15 meetings were held. Minutes from these meetings reveal that one objective was to foster improved general information exchange regarding each organization's respective projects. As well, efforts were made to ensure effective coordination of projects, for example, the annual OTCC forum.

What stands out across the meeting minutes is progressively greater clarity about joint initiatives. For example, at the November 2008 meeting, discussion time was allocated to "inter-organizational activities," for example, competency-based assessment (ACOTRO and CAOT) and a review of the National Occupational Therapy Certification Examination (ACOTRO and CAOT). On other occasions, efforts were made to reach inter-organization agreement about certain position statements. Momentum gradually built toward a more concrete profession-wide collaboration. At the December 2008 meeting, discussion was held about a national occupational therapy strategy:

Prior to November 2008, the CAOT developed an environmental scan. The CAOT introduced this proposal for a national strategy to OTCC members to get their feedback and see if their respective organizations may be interested in collaborating on this effort. Everyone agreed that this would be beneficial to each organization to have one common vision.

At the October 2010 meeting, a much more concrete vision for collaboration started to be articulated:

... it has become clear that there is a need for this Council to work together by using its strengths collectively. The Council can debate on how to approach and understand issues influencing different organizations. The Council must be aware of these issues, and share a similar approach when dealing with them. The Council must move beyond sharing of information. ... the Council does a good job of information sharing, but it is not always used to its maximum potential.

Important seeds were sown at this meeting. At the July 2011 meeting it was determined that “the development of a shared vision for occupational therapy in Canada will be the topic of the 2012 forum.”

Therefore, at the OTCC Forum in June 2012 in Quebec City, the vision for a new overarching collaboration within our profession in Canada, to be known as Occupational Therapy Canada (OTC), was articulated. Among other elements, considerable clarity was expressed regarding the need to respond to external forces acting upon the profession.

It was suggested that the current orientation of OTCC is not strategic and there is anxiety about potential negative issues that are on the horizon that are outside the control of the profession. The environmental scans highlighted that health care is not sustainable in its present form. The health care system is Darwinian – dependent upon the survival of the fittest. While rehabilitation should be a key component within health systems ... occupational therapy is undervalued. Occupational therapy organizations currently see the profession from a parochial position where a holistic perspective is needed. While each organization knows what they would like to accomplish, a national vision is needed to bring the efforts of the individual groups to work together for the benefit of the profession (OTCC, 2012, p. 1).

OTC’s terms of reference were subsequently approved by the participating organizations during 2013. OTC members continued to include ACOTRO, ACOTUP, CAOT and COTF, with invitations extended to representatives of the provincial and territorial professional associations to attend

an annual forum. The purpose of OTC includes the following elements:

[OTC] represents all sectors of the occupational therapy profession in Canada, including researchers, educators, regulators and professional associations. [OTC] promotes information sharing and coordinated action and planning on strategic priorities identified from time to time to further the development of the occupational therapy profession (CAOT, n.d., para. 1).

More specifically, OTC “1. identifies key areas and emerging trends; 2. determines priority initiatives for collaborative action; 3. establishes compatible and facilitating processes for action; 4. ensures effective communication within and beyond the profession; [and] 5. sponsors an annual forum to advance work on identified priorities” (CAOT, n.d., para. 2).

Collectively, the leaders of the occupational therapy organizations in Canada have recognized the need to work together in a proactive and strategic manner to advance the profession’s work within a complex and frequently challenging contemporary context. As stated by the participants at the 2013 OTC Forum:

“Consensus is needed regarding the key environmental drivers affecting the prospects for occupational therapists to address occupational needs and health and social outcomes. The profession’s organizations also need to develop a common understanding of the top clinical and social priorities for occupational therapy services and research” (Freeman et al., 2014, p. 27).

In a similar vein, the 2014 OTC Forum (Rappolt et al., 2015) included an environmental scan of Canada’s population needs and occupational therapist workforce trends, using, among other sources, the *Canadian Survey on Disability* (Statistics Canada, 2012) and the 2012 Canadian occupational therapy workforce data (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2013).

It is striking to note the common threads across these discussions as the profession’s leaders have worked toward developing a collective vision, for example, regarding the importance of developing an economic case for occupational therapy services. During the 2012 OTCC Forum (2012), the participants’ brainstorming exercise led to consensus about the following four priority needs for the profession: 1. economic case for occupational therapy in Canada; 2. national advocacy strategy to advance occupational therapy (e.g., national awareness); 3. human resource strategy (capacity, retention, leadership, diversity, succession planning, mentorship, volunteerism, professional engagement and involvement); and 4. integrated scope of practice strategy.

About the authors

Andrew Freeman, PhD, erg., is an associate professor in the Occupational Therapy Program at Laval University. **Susan Rappolt, PhD, OT Reg. (Ont.)**, is an associate professor and the chair of the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the University of Toronto. For more information, contact Andrew Freeman at: Andrew.Freeman@rea.ulaval.ca

During the 2013 OTC Forum (Freeman et al., 2014), participants articulated four continuing challenges for the profession's collective future:

1. Occupational therapy organizations need to collaboratively refine their conceptualizations of generalist and specialist practices, and advanced practice.
2. The occupational therapy profession as a whole needs to collaboratively control how it is recognized and defined.
3. Should entry-level programs continue to focus solely on generalist education (basic competencies) or begin to add educational streams for specialization? To what extent does this question reflect the realities of rural versus urban practices?
4. Who would bear the costs of regulating specialization should it warrant regulation in the future?

At the 2014 OTC Forum (Rappolt et al., 2015), the participants proposed the following vision statement as a provisional common national vision for the profession of occupational therapy in Canada: *Evidence-based occupational therapy is understood, valued and utilized as the profession that makes life worth living*. Coherent with this statement, several principles and action priorities were identified. And finally, most recently at the 2015 OTC Forum, a theme was pursued that has consistently been identified: economic evidence for occupational therapy services (report will be available soon).

Occupational Therapy Canada: Giving it life

Critical momentum is building to realize the vision of OTC to "...coordinate action and planning on strategic priorities. . .to further the development of the occupational therapy profession" (CAOT, n.d., para. 1). Now the challenge for our professional organizations is to determine how the OTC's collectively determined provisional vision can be debated, revised as needed and then reinforced across their respective mandates and priorities. Clearly, there are already many shared elements across the respective missions, visions, objectives and strategic priorities of each organization. Nevertheless, these organizations are each guided by their own board of directors who are in turn answerable to their members. ACOTRO's mandate differs in an important way from that of the other organizations insofar as the legislatively-determined regulators' roles are to protect the public interest and not to advance the profession's interests *per se*. Similarly, the 14 entry-level occupational therapy programs in Canada represented by ACOTUP are publicly funded and administered, with the mandate to create and teach knowledge, not advance the interests of the profession. CAOT, COTF and PAC (now ACOTPA) member groups are professional associations clearly established to advance the interests of the profession.

In sum, our profession in Canada is richly endowed with organizations sharing complementary interests and professional commitment, yet also challenged in a very competitive environment to establish a single collective voice to realize the profession's potential. How can the organizations successfully negotiate answering simultaneously to both the collective vision represented by OTC and to their individual boards and members? Undoubtedly, considerable work remains to answer

this and other related questions. However, as this brief overview of the historical evolution towards the development of OTC reveals, there is every reason for optimism. Stay tuned for updates. Readers are encouraged to share their suggestions for inter-organization collaboration to their relevant primary organization (i.e., ACOTRO, ACOTUP, CAOT, ACOTPA or COTF).

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Editor's note

For the last several years, the annual CAOT Conference has provided an opportune time for the leaders of the five national organizations to gather for the OTC Forum.