

Occupational Therapists' contribution to active ageing, health and well being in the older population

A political statement from Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries (COTEC)

Across Europe countries are experiencing a growth in the number of their older citizens and it is predicted that by 2015, 50% of the EU population will be aged over 50.

The social make up of society and family units are changing and the roles of older people are shifting. Increasing mobility, the growing number of women working and the lower birth rate makes the traditional social networks for older people more unpredictable and additional support from the community and statutory services is going to be essential to promote active ageing.

Individual rights and anti discrimination declarations are highly prioritised areas in the United Nations and are further strengthened by National legislation in all European countries. This includes the right of older people to live a safe and meaningful life.

In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) has set three pillars as a basic need for active ageing and life quality for older people:

- PARTICIPATION
Provide education and learning opportunities throughout the life course
- HEALTH
Prevent and reduce the burden of excess disabilities, chronic disease and premature mortality
- SECURITY
Ensure the protection, safety and dignity of older people by addressing the social, financial and physical security rights and needs of people as they age.

A preferred future

The preferred future is an inclusive and supportive society without discrimination towards older citizens, where everybody has the possibility to participate in social and cultural activities. Accessibility to all public buildings, means of transportation and leisure facilities has to be guaranteed and the elderly's home must be barrier free.

The goal is a society in which older citizens can experience autonomy and dignity, make their own decisions and are given the opportunity to contribute to the community they choose to live in and to create a life for older people that is meaningful and allows them to use their wisdom and knowledge for the benefit of all those around them.

The health and social care system should provide a wider and renewed selection of health awareness and promotion. Health prevention and community-based services for older citizens must enable and empower them to make considered and individual choices. New services should focus on rehabilitation, improving and maintaining functioning in daily life skills and the implementation of new technologies to enable the older people to stay in their own homes with dignity and fulfil their roles by engaging in occupations of their choice in order to support their participation in society.

The Occupational Therapists' contributions in reaching the goal for active ageing, health and well being in the older population

Occupational therapy is a profession concerned with promoting health and well being through occupation. The primary goal of occupational therapy is to enable people to participate in the activities of everyday life they choose. Occupational therapists achieve this outcome by enabling people to do things that will enhance their ability to participate or by modifying the environment to better support participation.

Occupational therapists have a broad education that equips them with skills and knowledge to work collaboratively with individuals or groups of people who have an impairment of body structure or function due to a health, both physical and mental health condition, and who experience barriers to participation.

Occupational therapists believe that participation can be supported or restricted by physical, social, attitudinal and legislative environments. Therefore, occupational therapy practice may be directed to changing aspects of the environment to enhance participation.

Occupational therapy is practiced in a wide range of settings, including hospitals, health centres, homes, workplaces, schools and specialist housing. Clients are at the centre of the therapeutic process, and outcomes of occupational therapy are diverse, client-driven and measured in terms of participation or satisfaction derived from participation.

Occupational therapists' interventions

- Maintain and improve activities of daily living
The occupational therapist can use validated assessments to evaluate the barriers to completing tasks and can develop graded programs to improve the involvement of an individual in their activities in daily life. The therapist can give advice on how to prioritise, or adapt activities to achieve the client's goal.
- Assess and improve functional ability
The occupational therapist has techniques for improving or maintaining functional abilities, such as motor skills and social and cognitive functioning.
- Implementation of assistive technology
The occupational therapist can assess for the need for assistive technology, both low and high-tech, and introduce it as part of a supportive program.
- Plan and implement barrier free living
The occupational therapist gives advice on home alterations to reduce physical barriers and introduces inclusive design in the planning processes in the community for example leisure facilities.
- Employment
The occupational therapist supports, gives advice and adapts or adjusts the work environment to make the older employees able to maintain their employment and contribute to workforce.
- Support and liaison with spouses and next of kin
The occupational therapist gives advice and support to the family and close relatives, to make them able to best meet the challenges and needs of their loved ones and to enable them to meet the aim of achieving active ageing for their family member.