

Poverty and Social Exclusion

Position Statement from Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries (COTEC)

INTRODUCTION

2010 is the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. Countries in the European Union have committed themselves to coordinate and execute national, regional and local measures to combat poverty and social exclusion in their countries.

The European Union is one of the richest areas in the world, but still 17% of EU citizens have such limited resources that they cannot afford the basics. Poverty has been linked to poor health and people with disabilities are more likely to have a low income, which in turn compounds social exclusion.

Poverty, and the social exclusion it entails should never be addressed as the fault or choice of the individual, but a consequence governed by various societal and cultural structures. Poverty and social exclusion are therefore the responsibility of the wider society as a whole, for which we must find modern, relevant and sustainable solutions.

The debate about poverty should not limit itself to the serious problems of starvation, numerous streams of refugees or civil protection. The European poverty question is in many cases related to problems connected with not having the financial means to play out ordinary, respected social roles on the basis of equality of opportunities, and to realise reasonable expectations in terms of health and social activities: for example, getting an education, finding work, being involved in leisure time activities and enjoying a social network within the family, at work and in the local community.

COTEC position – a preferred future

The Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries (COTEC) position is that it is essential to have a strong focus in 2010 and beyond to fight poverty and social exclusion in the European Countries. COTEC asserts that occupational therapy is an internationally recognised profession that contributes to the health and wellbeing of society and can be a key stakeholder in the prevention of poverty and social exclusion.

We believe that all EU citizens can contribute to society and should be encouraged to participate at the level they choose to do.

Occupational Therapy's contribution to reach an inclusive and economically viable society.

The key role of an Occupational Therapist is to contribute to a situation whereby vulnerable people can exercise their right to participation and occupation in their personal daily lives, at work, in their local communities and as citizens of their country. The ultimate Occupational Therapy goal is to work in collaboration with the individual to develop skills to allow them to participate fully in all areas of their chosen occupation.

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 Occupational Therapy process, and its outcomes are diverse, client-driven and measured in terms of participation and satisfaction derived from participation.

Occupational therapists' interventions

- **Working together with young mothers**

The occupational therapist can use work with young mothers, both individually and as part of a group to facilitate their parenting skills, to increase their confidence and to develop strategies to engage in a work environment.

- **Working together with homeless**

People who have been homeless for a long period struggle to adapt to being in 'conventional' housing environment, the occupational therapist uses techniques to enable, improve or maintain functional abilities and social skills to allow someone to successfully settle in their chosen community.

- **Working together with refugees**

The occupational therapist can work with the person to assess for the need for appropriate housing, group work to enable refugees to understand the cultural practices of the area they have moved into, build self confidence in their own abilities and work with employees to develop the necessary skills they need to facilitate the return to paid employment.

- **Working together with people with learning difficulties or for physical impairments to engage in work**

The occupational therapist supports, gives advice and adapts or adjusts the work environment to facilitate all potential employees be able to maintain their employment and contribute to workforce.