

Thinking about how occupational therapists can promote the human rights of vulnerable groups

Theresa Lorenzo

Associate Professor, Department of Occupational Therapy, School of Rehabilitation and Health Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town

When an idea suddenly becomes a reality it can be quite daunting and overwhelming, which was exactly how I felt when the editorial committee agreed to the idea of introducing a human rights theme to SAJOT. In motivating to the SAJOT editorial team for an issue on the theme of human rights, I argued that the purpose of calling for specific articles on human rights was to engage occupational therapists proactively in dialogue and action around our contribution to upholding human rights standards in teaching, learning and service delivery. Human rights perspectives recognise power, social justice, anti-discrimination, the indivisibility of rights and the right to health¹. Health is recognised as a socioeconomic right, along with the right to those conditions needed for health (eg, food, water, housing). Since 1994, government, public institutions (including higher education institutions), corporate sector and civil society organisations have embraced human rights that seek to promote the dignity and well-being of individuals and groups, for example through integrating disability rights into policy processes and legislation^{2,3}.

The idea arose from my participation in a “Health and Human Rights: Train-the-Trainers” course offered by Professors Leslie London and Laurel Baldwin of the School of Public Health and Family Medicine at the University of Cape Town. We were challenged to consider how we could protect and promote the human rights of the people with whom we work in different contexts. Much of the material drew on examples of doctors and nurses violating or protecting human rights of patients and other vulnerable groups. So how could we as occupational therapists create a space where our own profession would reflect and engage in a dialogue on the issues? It was envisaged that articles would describe how human rights standards and norms could be used by occupational therapists or any other practitioners, academics, researchers, and civil society organisations (especially disabled people’s organisations), to develop public policies and programmes; analyse, critique and monitor government performance; facilitate redress for those who suffer violations of their rights and support rights advocacy and civil society mobilisation.

Thus, we decided to use London et al’s⁴ criteria to consider articles for publication that would demonstrate human rights approaches to health equity, social justice and institutional transformation identified (see instructions to authors for details). The criteria are:

- ❖ Community engagement
- ❖ Mobilise resources
- ❖ Strengthen agency
- ❖ Facilitate agency of groups
- ❖ Address public-private debate
- ❖ Promote transparency and access to information

I set about my task of identifying potential contributors with eagerness so that we could launch the theme in an issue close to our national Human Rights Day on 21 March. I am, therefore, deeply appreciative of the willingness of the contributors to this issue to make it possible. I am also grateful to Marj Concha as SAJOT’s editor and the reviewers who agreed to a quick turn around time.

Fostering dialogue and action

Human rights are seen as indivisible and seek to address the inequities experienced by the most vulnerable groups¹. Promoting dialogue and action aims to mobilise resources across sectors to secure collective rights. The inclusion of a position paper from the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa in this issue on human rights, creates an opportunity for us to engage in critical debate about current issues that call for a response from the profession. We invite feedback on how you would like to see the theme of human rights continued in the journal. Should we have an annual issue dedicated to human rights or rather foster regular submission of articles focused on a human rights theme? We could also be looking to create an email list server such as the one set up by the Division of Health and Human Rights, School of Public Health and Family Medicine at University of Cape Town (etihr-net-1@lists.uct.ac.za and hrnet@lists.hst.org.za) to foster dialogue and action on human rights matters related to curriculum development, critical analysis of policies and practice, research, literature reviews etc. Let’s engage each other!

References

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2. Office of Deputy President, RSA. *The White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy*. Western Cape: Rustica Press, 1997.
3. United Nations. *UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities of People with Disabilities*. Vienna: UN, 1994.
4. London L, Pointer R, Norden P, editors. Using human rights to promote health equity. Poster pamphlet for School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town and Network for Equity in Health in Southern Africa (Equinet), Zimbabwe. Undated – available from the Division of Health and Human Rights, School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town.

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Theresa.Lorenzo@uct.ac.za

