

# Letter to the Editor: SAJOT

May 28, 2012

Dear Editor,

You posed a very good question in the April 2012 SAJOT: Why is the role of the Occupational Therapist (OT) so poorly understood after 70 years of the professions presence in SA?

My colleagues and I can confirm this lament. Working in the field of Vocational Rehabilitation we constantly have to explain our roles to employers, lawyers, labour and union representatives and human relations officers. The General Public out there does not know what an Occupational Therapist is.

May I approach your question with another question: Why are 'well known' professions - so well known - by the General Public? Everybody can tell you what a Policeman, Doctor, Dentist, Nurse, Lawyer or Teacher does.

The rule of 'needs' and 'wants' applies to these professions: "If I need it or I want it ... I'll know about it." The General Public has a high 'need and want' frequency and intensity for the services of these professions.

Apply this rule to the service of Occupational Therapy ... the

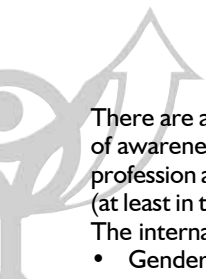
core business of Occupational Therapy being 'disability'. Only 10% of the General Public (world population) live with a disability ([www.disabled-world.com](http://www.disabled-world.com)) and most of the 10% are poor, elderly and have a low education level ([www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za)). Our profession serves a 'voiceless minority' of the General Public and thus it follows that our service is not high on the "needs and wants" list of the General Public.

Other 'well known' professions that are not on the 'needs and wants list' are Politicians, Singers, Actors, Sportsmen and Businessmen. Power, sex, money and violence - grabs the attention of the General Public - but are not attributes associate with Occupational Therapist. (At least not in my experience.)

In addition Occupational Therapy is multi-faceted: Just when the General Public thinks: "Ah-ha. I know what an Occupational Therapist does! She works with learning disabled children." They meet an OT who works with people who have a psychiatric illness, or a therapist who works with Hand injuries or an OT doing Medico Legal work. It could confuse even the most studious of the general population.

But it's not only 'external factors beyond our control' that affect the General Public's understanding of Occupational Therapy.





There are also internal obstructions that impede the development of awareness and understanding of our profession, and before the profession acknowledges and addresses these constraints, obscurity (at least in the General Public's mind) will remain a constant threat.

The internal obstructions of:

- Gender and race distribution,
- Remuneration,
- Publication and research and
- Therapist to patient ratio

all interplay with each other and become a Gordian knot that many of us might feel is impossible to unravel.

So are Occupational Therapists doomed to be the LBJ's (Little Brown Jobs) of society?

In the interest of the very people we serve we dare not allow apathy and obscurity in the profession. We have to continue addressing both internal and external obstructions to the General Public's understanding of Occupational Therapy. With confidence and passion every therapist needs to be all he/she has been trained to be in their specific area of practice and actively support and participate in all efforts to enhance the professional presence of Occupational Therapy in South Africa. Examples of this are the 'Occupational Therapy Awareness Week' winners featured in FOCUS April 2012.

As I write this letter the HPCSA's OCP Board (Occupational Therapy, Orthotics and Prosthetics and Arts Therapy Board) are busy with the revision of the **Scope of the Occupational Therapy Profession** and the **Scope of Occupation Therapy Practice**, and they are asking for contributions and inputs from

all Occupational Therapists in South Africa. This brings me to this letters last question:

Could it be that after 70 years, the Occupational Therapists professional presence in SA is still poorly understood, because Occupational Therapists themselves are not clear on what their role or scope of practice is?

My husband prides himself on his ability to 'spot an OT in a crowd' and he has uncannily done so on several occasions. Asked how he does it he said: "Look for sensible shoes, short nails, very little make up and an aura of 'down to earth goodness'. If she's wearing hand-made jewelry you can bet your pension on it. She's an OT."

Occupational Therapists will never be the Prancing Peacocks of society ... because we choose not be. When graduating we promised to serve a voiceless minority of our society. We do this best through hard work, dedication, loyalty, passion and professional conduct. We are enablers, motivators and bringers of hope to a section of society that are often misunderstood and sidelined. By enlarging our professional presence and the General Public's understanding of what we do, we enlarge the impact and influence of our service.

Long may Occupational Therapists bridge the gap between disability and ability.

Regards

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