

Past, present and future: Occupational Therapy in Jamaica

In 1955, two nurses were selected and sent on a scholarship by the Jamaican Government to England to pursue studies in Occupational Therapy (OT). They returned to Jamaica in December 1958 to introduce the OT programme at Bellevue Hospital, for persons with psychiatric disorders. In the early 60's one of the two pioneers migrated to Canada leaving one therapist on the island. For 14 years there were no other persons sent for training, however the programme received 2 volunteers to support the hospital.

In 1963 three others were sent to pursue studies as at that time it was recognized that OT could be valuable at the Rehabilitation Centre for spinal cord injuries. By 1969, OT seemed to be on the upward trend, with five therapists at Bellevue Hospital and one at the Rehabilitation Centre. Five other therapists joined over the next few years and extending services to the National Chest Hospital and to the Council for Persons with Disabilities. Jamaica at that time boasted the most OT's throughout the English speaking Caribbean.

By the late 1970's the numbers had fallen as the migration bug affected the profession. Many therapists left for greener pastures. Service delivery was affected greatly leaving one OT at the Rehabilitation Centre and two at Bellevue Hospital. In 1984 the remaining one of the two pioneers of the profession retired leaving one at Bellevue Hospital one at Sir John Golding Rehabilitation Centre. Another Jamaican trained overseas returned to the island and set up a private practice. The Population Census (2001) identified 162, 860 persons with disability and chronic illness. With a population of 2, 607, 632 in 2001 the number of people with disability represented 6.2% of the population. However there remained a significant shortage of OT's in the island to provide services to people with disability

In 2007, as a British OT, I arrived in Jamaica recruited by the Commonwealth Secretariat's Technical assistance programme to help address the shortage of OT for children with disabilities. I was encouraged to hear there was nine (9) other OT's working on the island. However 50% of therapists were working in private practice. I was one of five working for government services. Two other therapists worked with children in private practice. Other clinical practice areas include physical rehabilitation, mental health, gerontology and exercise and weight management.

Only one government institution, The Mico University College CARE Centre, had a position for an OT which had been vacant for 4 years. My first 2 years were spent at the CARE Centre as part of an inter-disciplinary team assessing children who were failing to achieve in the school system. Working with educational psychologists, special educators, a social worker, nurse and speech therapist (ST) children received a comprehensive assessment to identify needs and offer specialized support. Following assessment children may receive remedial intervention from special educators and individual or group therapy from OT and ST. However parents often did not have the resources to follow-up programmes. Some families had no toys at home to play with the child and a large part of stimulation was from television. Parents would have limited time to spend with the child to develop their skills. A large number of children were referred for placement in special education. However with a huge demand for special education a placement may not be available for 2-5 years.

In 2009, I moved to work for the Jamaica Association on Mental Retardation (JAMR) to train teachers in the schools of special education. The school's motto was "learning for life" with their mission statement "Preparing children with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities to take their rightful place in Jamaica's ever changing society by giving them the tools to help themselves." I felt I was truly in the right place and the association's hopes had come true in getting their first OT. Our main objective has been to improve the quality of education provided to the children by training the teacher's and teaching aides. Our ultimate goal is to increase the participation of students in class, building their capacity to succeed academically and socially. This includes a population of over 1000 students in 5 main schools and 21 satellite units island wide.

Most teachers had never met an occupational therapist before so initially awareness sessions were conducted to open their eyes to the role of occupational therapy in special schools. Interest was high and the list of training needs is growing and growing.....sensory processing and behaviour, fine motor skills, inclusive physical education, safe lifting of students with physical disabilities and back care, assistive devices for information technology, multi-sensory approach to teaching the alphabet, developing handwriting skills, improving upper limb function for participation in vocational training, postural management and wheelchair provision.....where will it end! A full year's programme of workshops, follow-up sessions and class-based training are scheduled hopefully to include as many enriching experiences for the teachers as possible.

Over my 2 ½ years here I have seen changes and developments for children with disabilities. Teachers are more aware of the potential of students and are starting to change teaching practices to include students as much as possible within the classroom. Also, NGO: Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) Jamaica now employs a Jamaican OT for rural services for children with disabilities. I hope more developments continue to occur.

The Health Human Resources Information Datasets in the Americas: Jamaica Database of Human Resources in Health (2008) states a standard of 25 health professions to every 10,000 persons, an average ratio for developing countries. Currently Jamaica operates at 22.8 health professionals to every 10,000. It is unclear how many of this 22.8 are allied health professions let alone OT. A Masters Degree in Occupational Therapy is under development at the University of the West Indies, hopefully to commence in 2010 to address the dire need for more OT in Jamaica.

The Occupational Therapy Association of Jamaica (OTAJ) launched its website and dynamic new logo in November 2008 to advertise itself worldwide. In November 2009, OTAJ will proudly host the Association of Caribbean OT's (ACOT) Biennial Conference. Our theme: "IT ALL COMES TOGETHER HERE..... CARIBBEAN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE". It hopefully will be an exciting event bringing OT's from across the Caribbean and the rest of the world together to share their experiences and hopes for the development of the professional in the Caribbean region. You are very welcome to join us! Visit us at www.occupationaltherapyja.com to find out more.

Donna Koolmees. Occupational Therapist



Visual arts class in special school



PE class in special school



Developing writing skills

A green logo consisting of a stylized human figure with arms raised, integrated with the letters 'O' and 'A' to form the word 'Occupational' and 'Association' respectively.

Occupational Therapy Association Jamaica



Teachers workshop