



Report of the Professional Issues Forum on **Workplace Health** Winnipeg, MB CAOT Conference 2003

Introduction

The CAOT Professional Issue Forum on Workplace Health was held at the Winnipeg Convention Centre, May 26, 2003 from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 pm. There were 57 participants including panelists, invited representatives of CAOT constituent and stakeholder groups, and other conference delegates.

Format

The Forum consisted of panel presentations, roundtable discussion and large group discussion.

Facilitator

Margaret Friesen, Assistant Professor, University of Manitoba, Department of Occupational Therapy, School of Medical Rehabilitation, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Panelists

Carrie Solmundson, Executive Director, Wellness Institute, Seven Oaks General Hospital, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Myrna Friedenber, Clinical Social Worker, Employee Assistance Professional, Manitoba Blue Cross, Employee Assistance Program, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Gail Archer-Heese, Occupational Therapist, PAR Health Services, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Objectives of the Forum were to:

1. Identify strategic options to advance occupational therapy practice in workplace health services.
2. Identify needs and educational resources to advance occupational therapy practice in workplace health.
3. Identify and explore policy issues related to the advancement of workplace health services.
4. Create an opportunity to introduce individuals and organizations that have an interest in workplace health and wellness.
5. Identify future research priorities in workplace health and wellness.

Panelist Presentations

Margaret Friesen introduced the session and reviewed background issues related to workplace health including the changing nature of the workplace and workforce, exposure to work-related stresses and injuries, and the potential impact on all systems and stakeholders involved in

workplace health. Participants were challenged to think broadly about the roles of worker, employer, insurance company and health care professional in workplace health.

Carrie Solmundson described today's work environment as one of high stress, increased job demands, depersonalization, increased health usage, work injuries, and work-life imbalance. The risks to workers' physical and psychological health are numerous and include cardiovascular disease, depression, repetitive strain injuries and drug or alcohol abuse. Organizations are also adversely affected through increased absenteeism, job turnover, low morale, and decreased productivity. Often employers offer individual programs such as disability management, employee assistance, health and safety, and health promotion to manage illness and absenteeism in the workplace. Rather than programs operating independently of each other, a corporate culture that values organizational health through integrated policies and programs is preferred. Best practice organizations have comprehensive efforts in the following four areas: 1) programs to help every employee handle personal issues so they can focus on work when they are at work, 2) policies that reflect the company's commitment to mutual trust and respect, 3) workplace environments where managers are held accountable for a supportive work culture, and 4) work practices that focus on project effectiveness and outcomes. A values-based work environment that supports employee health and well-being is integral to business.

Myrna Friedenberg defined employee assistance practice as a counselling service designed to resolve personal issues or concerns that affect individual health and well-being. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) promote employee and organizational health. Ms. Friedenber described two critical issues for employee and organizational health: work-life balance and management practice. Work-life balance: Today's workforce is comprised of several generations. Employers must consider the unique needs of these generations such as the female employee who balances her role as worker, mother of school aged children, and caregiver for her aging parents. Healthy organizations result when there is a balance between the day-to-day needs of the employee and the over-arching needs of the organization. Management practice: Many individuals in today's workforce are socially isolated; they lack supportive networks to help them cope with stress. Managers may require education to increase awareness of these social and familial trends, and the resultant need for employee assistance. Healthy organizations result when all levels of management espouse individual and family-centred values as critical to the overall success and functionality of the organization. Workplace health is optimized by an employer who provides a family-centred workplace promoting initiatives such as flex-time, condensed work week, paid parental leaves, and liberal holiday schedules.

Gail Archer-Heese discussed occupational therapy services in workplace health which comprises evaluation, prevention and rehabilitation. The physical and psychological demands of a job and the functional capacity of a worker are evaluated to ensure a fit between an individual's functional capabilities and the job. As well, evaluation involves identification of potential workplace hazards to develop injury prevention strategies. Education is integral to prevention and rehabilitation activities. The scope of education is broad and may include interpersonal skills, time management, sleep hygiene, work readiness and back education. At a systems level, occupational therapists may be involved in the development of safe work policies, recommendation of appropriate equipment to perform work tasks, and pre-employment screening.

Roundtable Discussion

Participants addressed the following questions in the roundtables:

1. How we encourage organizations to initiate workplace health?
2. What are the gaps in workplace health services and why do they exist?
3. Who needs to be involved as partners in workplace health if these new opportunities are to succeed?
4. What research and/or learning opportunities do you need to support your practice?

Summary of Discussion

- Occupational therapists must promote safe workplaces and employee health. Workplace health must be seen as desirable by an organization and key to good business practice. Some of the strategies to promote employer involvement include demonstrating the business case and return on investment of employee wellness programs for the employer, raising the profile of the organization as an “employer of choice” that demonstrates care and concern for employees, and providing statistical evidence and case studies of the cost-effectiveness of workplace health.
- Employers’ lack of vision and strategic planning for dealing with health risks and consequent injury prevention strategies, were identified as major gaps in workplace health. This disparity may be due to insufficient information, poor communication, and absence of management and legislative support. Front-line supervisors and middle managers who are responsible for promoting and reinforcing healthy work practices, require organizational support for implementing workplace health. Small business is a particular group where workplace health may present unique challenges. Occupational therapists could develop a model for smaller businesses, set policies for flexibility in administrative practices, design modified work, and present evidence for the low-cost/cost-effectiveness of such strategies. Opportunities exist at all levels for occupational therapists to address these gaps, from top management and policy setting, to forming employee teams in the workplace.
- Collaboration among all stakeholders is required to achieve workplace health: employees, supervisors, managers, health professionals, case managers, insurers and community agencies.
- Occupational therapists identified the need to readily access evidence for best practice and cost-effectiveness to support practice in workplace health. Case studies that profile successful prevention and intervention strategies are needed to promote workplace health. Knowledge and understanding of labour contracts, occupational health and safety policies and workplace legislation are required, as well as skills in negotiation and team building.