



Occupational Therapists Improve Lives, Save Money, Support Competitiveness



**2019 Pre-Budget Consultation
Submitted to the Standing Committee on Finance
From: The Canadian Association of Occupational
Therapists www.caot.ca**



Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists
Association canadienne des ergothérapeutes

Executive Summary

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) agrees with the Budget 2018 statement: “A strong publicly funded health care system is not just a point of pride for Canadians, it is an essential foundation for a strong, fair and prosperous country in the years to come” and submits the following three recommendations for consideration in Budget 2019, that will improve lives, save money and support “Canada’s competitiveness”

CAOT recommends that the Government of Canada:

- 1. includes occupational therapy services as part of its Extended Health Benefits,**
- 2. ensures the inclusion of occupational therapists on all primary health care teams in communities across Canada through funding, as part of the Canadian Health Transfer (CHT).**
- 3. supports the role of occupational therapists in enabling barrier free and accessible housing that allows seniors to age in place.**

Introduction

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) supports more than 17,000 occupational therapists across Canada.

Occupational therapists assist people in living life to the fullest. They prevent and solve problems that interfere with a person's ability to do everyday things such as taking care of themselves, engaging in leisure activities, going to work, running errands and participating in the community. Occupational therapists deliver evidence based solutions that are both clinically and cost-effective, improving health and wellness outcomes, by applying a unique mix of skills that address:

- the whole person – their physical, emotional, spiritual, cognitive abilities and their environment,
- all age groups,
- both prevention and treatment,
- care in numerous settings – home, community, institutions, schools, industry, business and government.

Recommendations

1. Government of Canada includes occupational therapy services as part of its Extended Health Benefits.

The Conference Board of Canada (2013) estimates that employee absenteeism costs the Canadian economy \$16.6 billion annually, with one long-term absence costing an employer roughly \$8,800. These figures point to the need for improved physical and mental health in the workplace, to improve productivity measures and move Canada's economy forward. A necessary supporting strategy is to have employers provide comprehensive employee health benefits that recognize the range of therapies and interventions available to improve health and to reduce absenteeism in the workforce.

Presently, occupational therapy services are not covered by the majority of extended health benefit plans for employees, including over 258,000 Federal public servants. Without coverage, individual workers may not enlist the services of an occupational therapist due to out-of-pocket expense. Doctors and other health professionals may not refer their patients to occupational therapy knowing there may be a financial implication. This lack of coverage means that employees miss out on a host of practical back-to-work strategies that address all aspects of the person's well-being. De facto reliance on more expensive health care treatments is an inefficient use of our scarce health care dollars, and places employers in an uncompetitive situation in terms of meeting their economic goals.

Occupational therapists provide cost-effective services that:

- identify and address barriers in the workplace proactively, with prevention as the aim,

- work with individuals and employers collaboratively, in the workplace setting, to complete a full, comprehensive assessment,
- tailor interventions to meet the individual's specific needs while taking into account their environment (workplace), and
- reduce the burden of absenteeism by facilitating a timely return to work after illness or injury.

According to Statistics Canada (2016), Canadian public servants are absent from work an average of 12.4 days each year. Given the large number of public servants in Canada, and the importance of their productivity to support government priorities, this absentee measure is not only costly in terms of our competitiveness but reflects an unmet need for interventions designed to improve workplace productivity.

Including occupational therapy services in coverage provided by Public Service of Canada extended health benefits will help address this pressing issue. The first step is to add coverage for occupational therapy services in a timed pilot project and set measures to evaluate its efficacy. If successful, the public service can serve as a model for Canadian employers to encourage inclusion of occupational therapy services in their own benefit plans. This in turn will increase access to occupational therapy across all sectors, fostering greater workplace health, wellness, and productivity for all Canadian employees.

2. Government of Canada ensures the inclusion of occupational therapists on all primary health care teams in communities across Canada through funding as part of the CHT.

Within primary care, occupational therapists provide services that extend beyond those of physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants, focusing on identifying how symptoms, such as disease or chronic pain, can impact function and participation in everyday activities (Muir, 2012). Additionally, occupational therapists work in a wider range of settings, and are unique in their dual focus on prevention as well as treatment and their bias towards a non-pharmacological approach. Occupational therapists help individuals implement strategies to manage their symptoms, improving their participation in daily activities, reducing the incidence of acute care situations and returning them to productivity sooner. They do this cost-effectively, boosting the competitiveness of Canada's over-burdened health care system.

Increasing the complement of occupational therapists as members of primary health care teams will improve effectiveness of patient care outcomes, a role that Regional Health Authorities or Local Health Integration Networks can play when optimizing their investment of health care dollars. At present, primary health care professionals refer patients to occupational therapists for assessment and care when and where they are funded and accessible. A 2013 National Physician Survey of 60,000 physicians in Canada found that over 70% expressed difficulties in securing appointments for patients with publicly funded occupational therapists.

A recent study by John Hopkins University identified that occupational therapy was the only category of health spending within hospitals where increased spending resulted in reduced re-admission rates (Rogers, Bai, Lavin & Anderson, 2016). Study results link these lower readmission rates to occupational therapists' skillset, assessing whether a client can be discharged safely into home and community by addressing potential barriers outside of the hospital, including living situation, and social supports. Tangible benefits would accrue if those who received occupational therapy while in hospital were also able to access occupational therapy through their primary care clinics upon discharge. Seeing occupational therapists in primary care could prevent hospitalizations in the first place, decreasing hospital expenditures. A study by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (2016) identified that occupational therapists' services resulted in avoidance of unnecessary hospital admission and/or reduced hospital stays, saving an average of \$15M annually.

Ontario's Family Health Teams (FHT) are an example of how occupational therapists can be successfully incorporated into primary health care teams. In 2010, the Government of Ontario approved funding for occupational therapists as health providers on these FHTs. Since then, there has been a slow increase in the number of occupational therapists working as team members in primary care in Ontario, addressing a wide range of functional issues, including pain management. Gatchel et al. (2007) identified that individuals treated by a multidisciplinary team were four times less likely to require medical treatments at follow up appointments. Funding for occupational therapy interventions could be allocated as part of CHT.

3. Government of Canada supports the role of occupational therapists in enabling barrier free and accessible housing that allows seniors to age in place.

As part of the roll out of the Government of Canada's 2017 National Housing Strategy and as articulated in the Government of Canada's response to the report entitled: "Advancing Inclusion and Quality of Life for Seniors" by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, Government of Canada allocate funding earmarked to include occupational therapists on teams that undertake repairs and renovations of existing housing stocks and construction of new housing – to ensure adherence to universal design principles. As Canada looks to address the onslaught of an aging demographic, increasing the inclusion of occupational therapy services provides a competitive edge by facilitating the pressing need to help seniors age in place.

A May 2017 report entitled "Re-Shaping the Housing Market for Aging in Place" by the Canadian Home Builders Association cites the value proposition of occupational therapists in home modifications that facilitate aging in place compared to the high cost of residential or hospital care. According to Home Modification Canada, the cost of including 75% of the required accessibility features in new homes costs less than \$500 per home.

Proof: occupational therapists provide this competitive edge:

- provide home and community-based services that extend beyond those of physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants, with client-centered strategies that address barriers to participation in everyday activities,
- provide interventions that address a wide scope of productivity-related and health promotion issues such as fall prevention, and home safety, strategies to aid with memory difficulties, recommendation of adaptive equipment, techniques for personal energy conservation, accessing community transportation following driving retirement, and more,
- are well suited to work with seniors to assess home safety and to assist with home modifications that promote aging in place. Research from the United Kingdom has demonstrated that occupational therapy housing adaptations can dramatically reduce costs associated with daily home care, with savings ranging from \$2,000 to \$50,000 per year,
- identify interventions related to housing that postpone entry into residential care, saving up to \$48,000 per person per year,
- have a unique understanding of how individuals function in their living environment, and can collaborate with design/renovation professionals to ensure the individual's needs are met in the process.

Strengthening Canada's health care is essential to Canada's economic performance. CAOT calls on the government of Canada to support evidence based, clinically and cost effective occupational therapy interventions that improve the health, wellness, quality of life and productivity of Canadians and contribute to Canada's competitiveness.

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