

Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation: Involvement and opportunities for occupational therapists

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This article, the first of a two part series, will focus on how and why occupational therapists have become involved in a variety of roles with the Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR) and opportunities for future involvement. The second article will focus more specifically on what occupational therapists need to know about working with clients with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Watch for part two of the article in the March edition of OT Now!

Why HIV and rehabilitation?

Let's begin this discussion with a brief outline of why rehabilitation professionals (including occupational therapists) should be interested in exploring their roles with clients living with HIV/AIDS. To begin with, due to the use of antiretroviral medications, HIV is increasingly becoming a chronic illness in developed countries instead of a death sentence. Individuals may be experiencing the long-term health-related consequences of HIV and/or the potentially adverse effects of treatment. A recent survey documented a remarkably high prevalence of disablement among individuals living with HIV in British Columbia (Rusch et al., 2004). Despite the role rehabilitation professionals have to play in the care and treatment of persons living with HIV, only a minority of these professionals currently serve this population (Worthington et al., 2005). In response to this gap, there is a need for increased information and education for rehabilitation professionals on the role of rehabilitation in the context of HIV and a need for more collaborative practice among health care professionals to better meet the rehabilitation needs of people living with HIV.

CWGHR is a national, multi-sector, not-for-profit, working group formed in 1998. Its primary objective is to address rehabilitation issues in the context of HIV and is centred on the needs of people living with HIV. CWGHR develops rehabilitation programs and resources for people living with HIV and has demonstrated innovation and excellence in the field of episodic disabilities. It aims to generate awareness

of and access to rehabilitation services and addresses the needs and concerns of families, caregivers, communities and people living with HIV and related disabilities. CWGHR is currently engaged in three large scale projects related to HIV and rehabilitation.

1. Interprofessional Learning Project:

The purpose of this project is to increase the capacity of rehabilitation professionals to respond to the rehabilitation needs of people living with HIV/AIDS in Canada. The objectives of this project include the following: develop new and enhanced existing knowledge-based relationships; increase awareness of existing and new curriculum resources, educational initiatives, programs and tools; and increase knowledge and skills related to HIV among rehabilitation professionals.

Through this project, an interdisciplinary education curriculum has been developed and pilot tested in three Canadian cities. Some of the key learning that has occurred through this curriculum development is the importance of utilizing community-based partnerships to support and to facilitate persons living with HIV as co-faculty participants, the integration of principles of interprofessional and case-based learning and the need to address sensitive practice in the context of rehabilitation and HIV. Intervention strategies for HIV related rehabilitation have been further explored and ongoing evaluation has taken place throughout the initiative. Future initiatives will involve pursuit of curriculum accreditation, dissemination of curriculum resources and opportunities for integrating curriculum into existing health and social care educational programs.

2. Episodic Disabilities Project:

This innovative project has positioned HIV as an episodic disability and has brought together a number of groups interested in working together on issues of common concern. One such issue is labour force participation. The unpredictable nature of HIV and other episodic disabilities, such as multiple sclerosis, mental illness and cancer can present challenges to active labour force participation, stable

income and social inclusion as fluctuations occur in a person's ability to participate in the labour force. Disability workplace and income support policies and programs may be well designed for people who can no longer take part in the labour force but do not

meet the needs of those who participate episodically.

Based on key guiding questions developed by a multi-sectoral national advisory committee, an international policy analysis was conducted and model recommendations were developed. As part of this project, a national survey was conducted with Certified Human Resource Professionals (n=482) regarding knowledge level and need for training in the areas of episodic disabilities. An economic assessment of a more flexible hypothetical Canadian Pension Plan/Disability (CPP/D) benefit program to allow disabled people who resume work to retain a portion of their CPP/D benefits was carried out. Based on these findings, planning for pilot sites to implement the proposed model has commenced and will begin in 2007, dependent on the funding for pilot site activity.

3. Collaboration with the International Centre for Disability and Rehabilitation (ICDR) and the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board:

This project will develop programs integrating the areas of rehabilitation, disability and HIV with a focus on gender and stigma as they impact the lives

of people living with or vulnerable to HIV. Through collaboration with the ICDR at the University of Toronto and the health board in North West Province, Cameroon, West Africa, the collective expertise of the partners will be utilized to develop resources and knowledge through reciprocal education sessions.

These sessions aim to bridge traditionally separate worlds and build capacity in issues related to gender, disability, rehabilitation and HIV.

How is occupational therapy involved with CWGHR?

The varied activities of CWGHR have offered occupational therapists a number of ways to get involved in these exciting initiatives. The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) representative, Todd Tran, participates as an organizational representative member of CWGHR. CWGHR membership is unique as it brings together rehabilitation professionals, people living with HIV/AIDS, and representatives of HIV/AIDS organizations, government agencies and human resource professionals. The CAOT representative attends CWGHR's annual meetings to collaborate, discuss and disseminate information with others from various disciplines and sectors. Todd also reports to CAOT and this increased awareness allows the association to respond to some of the emerging trends of rehabilitation for people living with HIV and AIDS. Through this collaborative effort, CAOT members will have increased awareness and insight in order to respond to the rehabilitation needs of people living with HIV/AIDS. This is done with support from CAOT staff members Darene Toal-Sullivan, Kathy Van Benthem and CAOT executive director Claudia von Zweck who have assisted with transfer of knowledge, communication with members and letters of support for proposals.

In addition to the more formal CAOT representative, CWGHR will be developing its membership structure to create further opportunities for other occupational therapists to join the group and share their experiences and expertise. Occupational therapists working not only in the area of HIV/AIDS but also with other episodic disabilities may be interested in learning from and collaborating with CWGHR. Opportunities for students to become involved will also be explored. By gaining strength in numbers, occupational therapists can develop best practices and expand services to this emerging population living with HIV/AIDS.

The major initiatives undertaken by CWGHR have also offered opportunities for the involvement of occupational therapists. Deb Cameron has been the CAOT representative on the Interprofessional Learning Project. As part of the advisory committee to this project, she has had the opportunity to assist in the development of curriculum related to HIV and

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rehabilitation and serve as a co-faculty member for one of the interprofessional education sessions. Through this role, Deb has also had the opportunity to co-author a number of posters and presentations which have shared this project at occupational therapy, physical therapy and HIV professional national and international conferences.

The Cameroon/CWGHR/ICDR project has offered an opportunity for Lynn Cockburn, a faculty member at the University of Toronto and ICDR associate, to provide research and clinical expertise to this emerging project. Other rehabilitation professionals have the opportunity to work with CWGHR on research projects related to HIV and rehabilitation: Muriel Westmoreland (who was an occupational therapy faculty member at McMaster University when the project originated but is now retired from McMaster University) is on the Advisory Committee for the

Episodic Disabilities project; Sheila Thomas, an occupational therapist from St. Michael's HIV team, has been involved in several projects and committees and Carolyn Gruchy from Alberta was the representative for CAOT before Todd Tran. To find out more about CWGHR and the current projects and initiatives visit www.hivandrehab.ca

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