

Submission
No 36

**INQUIRY INTO EQUITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND
APPROPRIATE DELIVERY OF OUTPATIENT AND
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN NEW SOUTH
WALES**

Organisation: Occupational Therapy Australia

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Inquiry into the equity, accessibility and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in New South Wales

Occupational Therapy Australia
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Introduction

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the equity, accessibility and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in New South Wales. Representatives from OTA would be happy to provide evidence before the New South Wales Parliament to further support this submission. The terms of reference for the committee's inquiry includes inquiring into and reporting on the '*appropriate and efficient allocation of mental health care workers, including psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists, GPs, councillors, social workers, allied health professionals and peer workers.*' This will be the focus of our submission.

OTA is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. As of June 2023, there were almost 30,000 registered occupational therapists working in Australia. Occupational therapists are allied health professionals whose role is to enable their clients to participate in meaningful and productive activities.

Occupational therapists and mental health

The provision of mental health services is a core area of practice within occupational therapy which dates to the inception of the profession, over 100 years ago. This expertise is nationally recognised and well-established in academic literature, and allied health practice.

Occupational therapists specialising in mental health work with individuals to support them to identify and successfully engage in the everyday activities they find meaningful. Occupational therapists working in mental health draw on a broad range of frameworks and models to provide strengths-based, behaviourally oriented, interventions to improve mental health and wellbeing. They draw on, and are trained in, occupational therapy specific tools and approaches as well as structured psychological techniques. Occupational therapists bring a unique occupational focus, addressing the activities and occupations that are important and meaningful to a person's daily life.

The practical, recovery-focused approach used by occupational therapists addresses not only an individual's diagnosis, but how the person may experience mental illness and the impact it has on their ability to function in daily life. Examples include a person's ability to work, manage household responsibilities, participate in schooling, sleep, perform acts of personal care or engage with others. This makes occupational therapy ideally suited for those experiencing complex mental illness or a significant impact on their day-to-day life as a result of their mental health condition.

Mental health occupational therapists work with:

- Children and young people experiencing behavioural issues because of diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, developmental trauma, autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, intellectual disability, and sensory processing differences.
- Adults experiencing mental illness, including anxiety and depression as well as more complex mental illness such as schizophrenia and borderline personality disorder.
- Older adults, including those with behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia.

OTA Mental Health Endorsement

OTA manages the *OTA Mental Health Endorsement Program*, which provides recognition of the additional knowledge, skills and experience of occupational therapists focusing their scope of practice on mental health. The endorsement program sets a high standard for occupational therapy and provides an important signal to practitioners, funders, and users of occupational therapy services about what the profession considers the foundation for safe and effective practice. More information is available on OTA's website: <https://otaus.com.au/membership/ota-member-programs/mental-health-endorsement>

OTA Mental Health Capability Framework

OTA released a mental health capability framework in March 2023. The mental health capability framework proposes a series of capabilities that occupational therapists practising in mental health settings should seek to achieve at different career stages. The framework enables individual occupational therapists to make decisions about where to focus their development activities, and managers and employers to make decisions about the areas of capability development they should be providing for their staff. More information is available on OTA's website: <https://otaus.com.au/practice-support/areas-of-practice/mental-health/capability-framework>.

Addressing workforce shortages

Occupational therapy has been identified as one of the fastest growing registered health professions in Australia. Despite this growth and the significant growth of occupational therapy courses available, the New South Wales (NSW) community mental health care system continues to carry vacancies and is having increasing difficulty in recruiting occupational therapy and mental health occupational therapy roles, especially in remote and rural areas. Our members have informed us that for

the first time since the establishment of the 16 geographical Local Health Districts (LHD), one LHD no longer employs any mental health occupational therapists as they have been unable to recruit to vacancies. We understand from our members that recruiting occupational therapy staff is more difficult than it has been in decades. The shortage is likely to become more pronounced, particularly as occupational therapists are exiting the community health system in favour of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which offers higher remuneration and lower caseloads.

Workforce shortages are creating higher caseloads. We have been informed of instances where occupational therapists have declined routine student placements because of the high caseloads as they cannot accommodate the supervision of students as well. High caseloads are contributing to professional burnout, which is currently occurring at an unprecedented rate within the occupational therapy profession.

High caseloads are compromising the quality of care, and equitable access to care. We understand from our members that the provision of care in the community mental health system is currently being driven by crisis responses and that there is a focus on servicing patients with mandated community treatment orders. Meanwhile consumers experiencing different circumstances or mental health needs are not able to access timely mental health care.

These outcomes validate the need for the NSW Government to provide a substantial investment into the community mental health system via the recruitment of qualified mental health clinicians, including occupational therapists. There is also a need to support strategies that retain occupational therapists and mental health occupational therapists in the community mental health care system as a priority, to ensure that burnout and exit is addressed, and consumers can access vital mental health occupational therapy services. The following is a list of recommendations to address issues that are exacerbating the exit of occupational therapists in the NSW community mental health system, or impacting on the ability to recruit to positions in the first place:

- **Recognise the value of mental health occupational therapists:** Effective allocation of mental health workers requires an understanding of their unique skills. Our members report that there is a lack of understanding within the system of the role of occupational therapists and mental health occupational therapists and of the unique occupation-based care that they provide.
- **Invest in discipline specific roles:** Increasingly within the NSW community mental health system we have observed a shift away from discipline specific roles (including mental health occupational therapy roles) in favour of generic multi-disciplinary positions. Discipline specific roles have the expertise and experience needed to provide evidence-based mental health care to an elevated level, increasing the quality of care. Creating discipline specific roles

will better enable occupational therapists to work to top of scope and provides opportunities to advance skill sets.

- **Adopt a hybrid working model:** An alternative to discipline specific roles is the option of a hybrid model of practice. Under this model health professionals provide a defined percentage of generic case management and discipline specific care model, ideally 50/50. This model would support greater access to mental health services.
- **Investigate clinical supervision models:** There is currently limited availability of clinical supervision for mental health occupational therapists working in the community mental health system in NSW, this impacts quality of care and professional development opportunities. Alternative approaches to supervision, such as peer review practice, could be explored as well as funding for implementation.
- **Offer flexible working arrangements:** Since the pandemic, many healthcare sectors such as private occupational therapy practice, have adopted more flexible working arrangements including hybrid working models and the option to work from home to complete administrative tasks such as report writing. The benefits of a hybrid working model have been shown to improve flexibility, productivity, and importantly worker satisfaction rates. The public health system tends to require staff to work onsite, which has seen the departure of occupational therapists to more favourable, flexible working arrangements.

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