

Short Report

A careers pack distributed to 184 occupational therapy managers in and around London contained a questionnaire which gathered information about their role in promoting occupational therapy as a career. Twenty-six managers responded (14.1%) and considered that the College of Occupational Therapists had the principal responsibility for promoting the profession. Three-quarters considered that the careers pack was fairly effective and two-thirds were willing to use it to promote the profession.

Although pleased to have received the pack, the managers had more negative than positive comments about it. Managers may not appreciate their influential position in recruitment to the profession and other stakeholders should collaborate to support them in their pivotal role.

Promotion of Occupational Therapy as a Career: a Survey of Occupational Therapy Managers

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Introduction

Over recent years, there has been a decrease in the number of applicants for the increased number of places on occupational therapy courses (College of Occupational Therapists [COT] 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002a). This assumes greater importance because the National Health Service (NHS) is committed to significant increases in the numbers of health professionals to be educated (Department of Health [DH] 2000a, 2000b, 2002). Several studies on the recruitment of occupational therapy students conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) have identified that the most frequently reported way in which students first become aware of the profession is through their work in a health care setting (Craik and Naphthine 2001, Craik et al 2001, Craik and Wyatt-Rollason 2002).

The COT provides promotional materials, including leaflets, posters, a *Directory of Courses* (COT 2002b) and a website (COT 2002c). Broad (2002) reported the launch in 2000 of a careers video, which provides an introduction to the profession. The NHS publishes a careers booklet with general information and leaflets about individual professions for insertion into the booklet (NHS 2001). It has also developed a website which provides information about careers in health (NHS 2002).

Recruitment strategy

With the need to increase recruitment to occupational therapy education and the identification of health and social care settings as a potential source of applicants, a recruitment strategy was devised by Brunel University in

conjunction with the COT. This was funded by the North East London Workforce Development Confederation (NELWDC), which is responsible for commissioning occupational therapy education in the London area. As part of this strategy, a careers pack was distributed to, among others, occupational therapy managers in and around London. It was hoped that it would encourage managers to promote occupational therapy as a career and provided some material to do so. The pack included the COT video, the *Directory of Courses*, posters and leaflets and the NHS careers booklet with the occupational therapy insert.

This study aimed to establish the opinions of these occupational therapy managers on the effectiveness of the careers pack and to identify their role in the promotion of occupational therapy as a career.

Method

As the careers pack was to be posted to the managers, a self-administered postal questionnaire was designed for the study and included in the pack. This had the advantage of allowing a large sample of opinion to be gathered in a short time and at a relatively low cost, even though the use of questionnaires can be associated with a low response rate. As the study was funded by the NHS and was conducted in collaboration with the COT and Brunel University, it was hoped that this would enhance its credibility and, hence, draw a good response rate. Indeed, the pack itself could be considered to be a small incentive

and a way of trying to promote a good response rate (Oppenheim 1992).

A covering letter outlined the purpose of the study and explained who had been selected for inclusion; the questionnaire was printed on coloured paper with a Brunel University logo and named the COT and the NELWDC as collaborating partners; and a freepost envelope was enclosed for the return of the completed questionnaire.

The questionnaire had an introductory statement describing its purpose. It consisted of closed response questions to elicit demographic information and facts and open questions to allow respondents to express their opinions. The results were analysed using Excel and content analysis. Following approval by the University Ethics Panel, the packs with the enclosed questionnaires were posted to 184 named occupational therapy managers in September 2001, with a return date of 4 weeks later.

Results

Response rate

Of the 184 questionnaires, 28 were returned. One of these was spoiled and another had no occupational therapy manager in place at the time, giving a response rate of 14.1% (26/184).

Background of the managers

Ten of the occupational therapy managers were from physical health settings, six from mental health settings and five from social services; three were community based and two worked in paediatrics. Their length of service as managers ranged from 6 months to 18 years. They worked in hospitals, including day hospitals, within the community, in social services and in settings such as drop-in and resource centres. The number of staff they managed ranged from 4 to 180, with a mean of 27 staff. Twenty-three managers were female and three were male.

Promotion of occupational therapy

On a five-point scale, the managers rated their agreement with the statement: 'Overall, occupational therapists promote their profession well.' One manager strongly agreed with the statement, 7 agreed with it and 7 were uncertain; 11 disagreed with the statement and none strongly disagreed.

The managers ranked those whom they believed should take most responsibility for promoting occupational therapy as a career. One was the highest score and four was the lowest score. These scores were then weighted, with scores of one being weighted four and scores of two being weighted three and so on. All but one manager ranked the COT as having the principal responsibility, with the universities, the NHS and occupational therapy managers having similar but lower levels of responsibility, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Groups that 26 occupational therapy managers considered responsible for promoting occupational therapy as a career

Group	Weighted score
College of Occupational Therapists	103
Universities	55
NHS	54
Occupational therapy managers.....	48

Twenty-three managers considered that they should take an active role in promoting occupational therapy as a career with the remaining three disagreeing, citing lack of time in their normal daily activities as their reason. However, one of these noted: 'This is already part of the job and promotion is conducted daily through interaction with clients.' They noted how often they were involved in promoting occupational therapy, with over 40% reporting 'ad hoc' as the most frequent option, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency with which 26 occupational therapy managers promoted occupational therapy as a career

Frequency	N	%
Daily.....	1	3.8
Weekly	0	0.0
Monthly.....	5	19.2
Quarterly.....	3	11.5
Annually.....	4	15.4
Ad hoc	11	42.3
N/A	2	7.7
Total.....	26	100

The managers also noted the methods that they used to promote occupational therapy. Careers events formed the most frequently reported method, noted by around two-thirds of the managers, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Methods used by 26 occupational therapy managers to promote occupational therapy as a career

Method	N	%
Careers events.....	17	65.4
National Occupational Therapy Day.....	15	57.7
Presentations	12	46.2
Other	12	46.2
Posters	11	42.3
Leaflets	10	38.5
Department open days.....	8	30.8
Specialist publications.....	2	7.7

Careers pack

All but one manager reported having a copy of the careers video; however, 19 of the managers had not used it. Three managers considered the pack to be very effective in promoting occupational therapy as a career, 19 fairly effective and 4 slightly effective. Sixteen managers indicated that they would 'definitely' be willing to use the careers pack to raise the profile of occupational therapy and 9 would 'possibly' be willing, with 1 'highly unlikely' to be willing to use the pack.

Comments on the careers pack

Seventeen managers responded to the invitation to comment on the careers pack, generating seven positive comments: it was a good start to have something to assist with promotional activities and the brochures were informative and well designed. However, there were 23 negative comments, mostly relating to the video which was considered not to represent occupational therapy well. In particular, it was seen to portray only white middle-class women, with ethnic minority, male and disabled occupational therapists not well represented. In addition, the brochures and posters were considered dull and not inspirational.

Eleven managers made recommendations about the careers pack, with four suggestions emerging. The COT should set up a permanent careers help desk; the pack should be available to all school careers advisers; a series of videos should be produced to cover the varied range of settings in which occupational therapists work; and the COT should hold seminars, using the pack, in schools and further education colleges. Finally, 13 managers indicated their willingness to be involved with Brunel University in further work to promote occupational therapy as a career.

Discussion

Response rate

In discussing these results, the influence of the low response rate at 14.1% must be taken into account. While a low response rate is an acknowledged disadvantage of postal questionnaires, a number of measures had been taken to minimise this and it was disappointing to note the outcome (Oppenheim 1992). The questionnaire might have been overlooked among the other contents of the pack or have been discovered after the return date. Although the pack was addressed to named managers, they may not have opened the pack themselves and the contents may have been redirected to another member of staff. A follow-up strategy might have improved the response rate, but time and resources precluded this.

Once the limitations of the method and the specific procedures employed in this study are acknowledged, then the nature of the non-respondents can be explored. At the time of the study, the NHS Workforce Development Confederations had been in existence for 6 months, having assumed responsibility for workforce planning and for commissioning occupational therapy education from their predecessors, the Education and Training Consortia. This important process is perhaps not as well understood as it could be, so the managers may not have realised the significance of the study. Perhaps the non-respondents were not involved in career promotion. Alternatively, as the results of the respondents indicated, the non-respondents might also have judged that the principal responsibility for promoting occupational therapy as a career was not theirs and, therefore, did not respond to the questionnaire.

Opinion of promotion

Again, all but one manager judged that the COT had the principal responsibility for promoting occupational therapy as a career, with other organisations and occupational therapy managers having less responsibility. Although 23 managers thought that they should take an active role in promoting occupational therapy as a career, few of them reported doing so on a regular basis. These results suggest an ambivalent attitude to career promotion: the managers acknowledged that it was important and that they should take an active part, but their actions did not reflect this attitude. It may be that the managers were not aware of the increased need to promote occupational therapy as a career to enlarge the pool of applicants to the profession. Equally, they may not have appreciated the pivotal role that they could play in doing so. In their responses to a more general question, the managers judged that overall occupational therapists did not promote the profession, which may be a more realistic reflection of their own attitude.

Opinion of the careers pack

All but one manager reported having a copy of the careers video, with a quarter having already used it. However, they may have interpreted the question in relation to the copy of the video that they had just received in the careers pack. Nevertheless, the pack was judged to be fairly effective by three-quarters of the managers, with almost two-thirds indicating that they would be willing to use it. Given the discrepancy between the managers' attitude to promotion and their reported level of promotional activity, these views must be regarded with caution.

The managers had more negative than positive comments about the careers pack, especially the video, and that may have limited the number who had used the video. All their recommendations were regarding how the COT could improve its promotion of the profession. While these were all valid suggestions, they emphasised the view of the managers that the COT has the principal responsibility for promoting the profession.

Conclusion and recommendations

The low response rate limits the ability to generalise these results to a larger population. However, if the managers who did respond were the ones with a greater interest in career promotion, then there may be implications for the ability of the profession to attract sufficient students in the future. Those who responded had a positive attitude but this was not necessarily followed through by positive action. Although recognising their role in promoting the profession, these managers judged the NHS and universities to have equivalent responsibility and considered that the COT had a much greater responsibility. While the provision of the careers pack was welcomed, there were negative views about the content of the video and suggestions about how the

COT could enhance its promotional activity. If this view is more widely held, then the COT may have to increase its promotion and members may have to pay increased subscriptions to support this. They may be willing to do this rather than become more involved in promotion themselves.

Alternatively, there would be considerable advantages if all the stakeholders in promoting occupational therapy as a career could work together to enhance their efforts. National Occupational Therapy Day is an obvious vehicle for promoting the profession as a career and this was the focus in 2000 and 2002 (Anon 2002). The distribution of the careers pack is one example of local collaboration and there would be merit in exploring similar ventures. The respondents had good intentions about promotion and strategies to translate these into positive action should be supported. Indeed, half of them offered to be involved in further promotion with their local university.

The NHS has responsibility for promoting careers in occupational therapy and other allied health professions and has the material to assist with this. Through the Workforce Development Confederations, the NHS also has responsibility for workforce planning and commissioning occupational therapy education; it should, therefore, be willing to respond to requests to support student recruitment activities. In addition, universities offering occupational therapy education have obvious motivation to maintain and increase applications and providing occupational therapy managers with their recruitment materials would be beneficial.

Occupational therapy managers are in a prime position to influence many potential recruits to the profession and other stakeholders need to find ways to support them in their pivotal role.

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