



College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario  
Ordre des ergothérapeutes de l'Ontario

# Building an Effective Strategic Plan:

Voices of Ontario's Occupational Therapists

March 15, 2017



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# Planning to Succeed

In health care, the best possible results hinge on the right planning. That's true for all sorts of professionals – and organizations too.

Across Ontario, occupational therapists create plans to give clients the most appropriate support and help ensure their optimal functioning. Likewise, the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario continually explores ways to be an effective regulator.

That's what strategic planning is all about. In 2016, the College began to develop a new 2017-2020 Strategic Plan (to take effect June 1, 2017). As part of that process the College sought input from a range of stakeholders, including Ontario's occupational therapists (OTs).

The College exists to protect the interests of the public, and the skill and expertise of OTs is, of course, central to that.

Like any regulatory College, we issue certificates of registration to those who've met the education and qualifications necessary to practice. We develop, monitor and update the standards of practice that every OT working in Ontario must follow. Through the quality assurance program, we help OTs to remain current with their practice and to grow their knowledge throughout their careers. And if issues do arise, we investigate, hold hearings and carry out discipline in an open and fair manner.

COTO and other regulators play a critical part in encouraging the public to request qualified professionals, and have confidence in the profession. We are here to help people make informed decisions about their health services, and to support the right to safe, competent and ethical occupational therapy service.

In crafting our strategic plan, we wanted to tap into the collective knowledge and opinions of the people who deliver that service. So we invited OTs to complete an online survey. These perspectives helped to inform the creation of the strategic plan.

Now, we want to share that feedback. We feel that it's informative for OTs to learn what's on the minds of their peers.

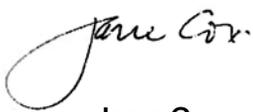
In the survey, we asked for thoughts around four broad areas:

1. biggest challenges for the occupational therapy profession;
2. most important areas of focus for the College;
3. information about OTs that the public should be aware of; and
4. responsiveness of the College to OT issues.

Why these four? If the College is to regulate effectively, we must understand the issues facing the professionals on the frontlines. What are the expectations of OTs, and what are OTs' expectations of the College?

This summary presents the themes that emerged under each of the four categories, a look at the leading answers to each query, and verbatim quotes that are representative of these opinions.

We thank everyone who took the time to participate. Together, the survey responses provided valuable insight into the views of Ontario's OTs.



**Jane Cox**  
President



**Elinor Larney**  
Registrar



# 2

## Executive Summary

The public should be confident in the safe, ethical and competent service provided by Ontario's occupational therapists (OTs), who are accountable to the College. In 2016, the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario launched a strategic planning process to define its vision and directions for the next three years. The consultation generated a strong online response from a cross-section of OTs (more than 800) currently practicing throughout the province.

Through the survey, OTs shared their perspectives around four broad areas, with these main findings:

### 1. What are the biggest challenges for the profession?

- **Caseload:** 41% mentioned increasing case demand (numbers and complexity), with some concern about having enough time to provide proper services.
- **Resources:** Roughly 25% talked about a lack of funding/resources, with the difficulty of being client-centered when services, equipment or information are limited.
- **Employment:** About one in four said that employment issues are a challenge, for example, work hours, a lack of job opportunities and security, and, low pay.
- **Recognition:** One in five feel challenged around recognition and respect for the profession (a lack of advocacy/visibility for the OT role, or a lack of knowledge about OTs).

### 2. What are the most important areas of focus for the College?

- **Advocacy:** 31% want the College to do more to uphold the profession (promote the role of OTs, or support more coverage/funding/support for occupational therapy services).
- **Development:** 13% want a focus on education, and 13% point to the quality assurance program.
- **Everyday practice:** 8% mentioned the standards.

### 3. What should the public know about OTs?

- **Role of OTs:** 66% want greater awareness of occupational therapy services; scope of practice; OT contribution to health; and diverse types of OT work and practice settings.
- **Credibility of OTs:** 21% say it's essential to convey the high level of training; standards; qualifications; and oversight of OTs.

#### 4. Is the College responsive to OTs?

- **Knowledgeable, helpful and relevant:** 59% said yes, listing things like thoughtful responses to practical issues; guidance on regulatory expectations; timely updates; and useful learning.
- **Lack of understanding and clarity:** 18% said no, suggesting that the College doesn't know the issues that OTs face every day; doesn't provide enough specifics on guidelines; and over-regulates.

Some concerns or hopes expressed by OTs are outside the College's scope, particularly advocacy, and would be most appropriately addressed through an association. These responses suggest an opportunity to reinforce the College's mandate for public protection.

While the College does not have a role in promoting OT professionals, the desired outcomes of the 2017-2020 Strategic Plan include increased confidence in OT regulation and improved quality practice. The plan, to take effect June 1, 2017, will revolve around public engagement, transparency and promoting professional standards.



## About the Consultation

As part of strategic planning during 2016, the College consulted with staff, Council, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, OT associations and other OT regulators across the country. To get the views of Ontario's OTs, the College invited OTs to complete a survey online. An outside research firm conducted the survey, and kept all responses confidential; no individual names were linked to any responses.

In the summer of 2016, 824 OTs took the time to complete the survey. As the makeup of respondents also matched the demographics of the registrant base (gender, age, district and practice area), the College gained a good snapshot of OT perspectives. This was the College's most extensive registrant consultation for planning purposes.



# 4

## Challenges Facing the Profession

Do more with less – that’s the expectation weighing most heavily on registrants. An increasing caseload demand is the #1 challenge among OTs, mentioned by 41% of respondents.

Many OTs commented on not only the number of cases but their nature: “more complex clients and families taking more time and effort”.

Given the caseload burden, some OTs worry that they don’t have time to provide the proper level of patient care. That can lead to a quandary. As one OT put it, “the decision regarding whether to give a few people adequate therapy or lots of people a little bit.”

Caseload challenges are greatest for those in acute care and geriatric/continuing care, but are felt in all practice areas.

In the hospital sector, one OT noted that budget cuts lead to a “push to see more patients in a shorter timeframe.” Another OT, this one in the auto insurance sector, commented on a similar challenge to “provide superlative service, reach strong conclusions after completing assessments and do this...with increasing demands for lengthy paperwork.”

As OTs noted, administrative demands can be high. That includes the needs of both the workplace and the College. “In my clinical role, my biggest challenge was management commenting on how having an OT was a lot of work – more time consuming/less flexible in some ways with all of the College requirements.” Can that have an unintended negative impact? That same respondent added that “I also found in practice that the College requirements felt so grand at times that I had trouble managing. When College requirements impact provider anxiety and subsequent care, this is a problem.”

Yet another registrant feels that the College can have a “very strict and extreme interpretation of regulations and legislation, which often hinders OT practices.”

Understaffing is another part of the caseload challenge – “no coverage for sick time and vacation,” said one OT. Another observed that the job has “more tasks added but [we’re] still expected to do all previous tasks as well, due to cutbacks in staffing.”

An added factor, said a survey respondent, is “poor coordination of services in the community, resulting in increased workload and the need to help families navigate the health care system.”

Roughly 25% of OTs mentioned the lack of funding/resources as a challenge. One talked about the increasing difficulty of “being completely client-centered when resources are minimal.”

Those resources have several dimensions. One OT complained about “not enough time or funding for clients – either service funding or equipment funding.” Still others cited lack of resources in terms of the backing or information needed to perform at their best: “lack of support from the employer”, “difficulty finding evidence-based interventions”, “finding information about certain conditions and how to work with a client.”

About one in four OTs also said that employment issues are a challenge, for example, shorter work hours, a lack of job opportunities and security, and low pay. Younger OTs are more likely to face some of these challenges. Among the specific issues mentioned:

- **Finding jobs:** “The practice of OT does not acknowledge any specialty to secure our positions. We are too general.”
- **Inequality of compensation:** “A distinct pay differential between hospital positions and home health.”
- **Insufficient compensation:** “Working overtime and not being paid, working through lunches and never feeling like the work is done.”
- **Moving up:** “Lack of opportunity for advancement in leadership roles.”

For one in five OTs, a lack of recognition and respect for members of the profession is also a challenge (particularly for OTs working in mental health). That includes a lack of advocacy/visibility for the OT role, and a lack of knowledge about OTs.

One OT expressed frustration this way: “I think the biggest [challenge] is still the dominance of the medical profession in our health care system. Occupational perspectives and occupational therapy, which have so much to offer to improve health outcomes, are not recognized.”

That can be true for the public (where there’s some role confusion), but also among colleagues and administration. As one OT said, “Other health care professionals lack knowledge and understanding of occupational therapy and its scope of practice.”



# 5

## College Areas of Focus

Where should the College focus in the next three years? The College's overall mandate remains the same. As a regulator, the College acts in the public interest. That means protecting the public by supporting their right to safe, competent and ethical occupational therapy service, and holding occupational therapists (OTs) accountable for their conduct and practice.

Ontario OTs have their own views on where the College should place its attention. Almost one in three OTs, 31%, wants the College to do more to uphold the profession. That includes:

- promoting the role of OTs;
- calling for occupational therapy services to be covered by insurance and OHIP;
- encouraging greater support and protection of OTs; and
- supporting increased funding and resources for OTs.

These feelings are especially evident in acute care. Overall, much of the sentiments revolve around making the impact of the profession felt widely and deeply. "Increase the profile of the OT profession," said one registrant. Another said: "Get our voice out there. People need to know what we do, what impact we can have on clients lives. If we don't define ourselves soon, we are going to experience more and more budget cuts."

Other registrants mentioned the importance of accessibility, for example, having enough OTs in rural areas, and access through insurance ("as other allied health professionals are covered"). Yet another OT talked about boosting the status of OTs in the health system, saying that "keeps us significant [and] our area of practice protected and viable."

The significant number of responses around promoting OTs raises a key question: What are the respective roles of a College and a professional association?

While the College exists to protect the public, professional associations have an important yet separate role to promote their members. Associations provide a voice and resources for the profession, advance their interest, and push the value of the profession.

In short, Colleges regulate while associations advocate. That said, it is to everyone's benefit to ensure a profession that can meet the needs and expectations of the public.

Some of the survey responses did make a connection between support of the OT role and public protection. “Increased work demands placed on OTs from management and the health care sector are likely leading to burnout and delays in timely documentation, all of which could have an impact on the quality of patient care. The College could protect the public by liaising with stakeholders (management, practice leaders) to clarify the importance of work-life balance and protected time for documentation.”

An OT said that the College plays a part in encouraging the public to understand and request qualified professionals for their health care. That’s not so much advocating for the profession, said another OT, as it is “increasing public awareness of OT standards and practices.”

Other suggested areas of focus include education and quality assurance, each named by 13% of respondents. For education, the feedback touched on topics (for example, scope of practice, electronic charting, best practices in client care, informed consent) and mode of delivery (quick and interactive, workshops, webinars, more user-friendly “quick tips”).

Regarding QA, some OTs also mentioned becoming more user-friendly online: “The yearly development plan is at times difficult to follow.” Others want to see the program streamlined: “Focus on the ‘real’ indicators of competency”.

Almost one in 10 OTs (9%) wants to streamline something else: College costs and fees. “Review the annual fee structure, which is too high considering the low risk of harm in occupational therapy compared to other health disciplines,” said one registrant. Others called on the College to demonstrate fiscal responsibility in its operations.

Eight percent of OTs want a focus on standards of practice. One OT expressed a wish to “Clarify standards so they focus on clinical direction/application instead of ambiguous explanation of jurisprudence”. Another wants the College to ensure that standards are expressed at a “more practical level.”

To make the standards most relevant, an OT wants the College to grasp what it’s like to work in various settings. “Try to gain a better understanding of what realistic expectations look like across the areas of practice. If the College truly understood the practice of frontline OTs, it would improve their ability to protect the public, while also helping OTs develop their practice to a higher achievable standard.”

One OT feels that it’s important to “educate the registrants of the standards and College guidelines so we can have a voice when advocating for our profession within our respective areas of practice.”

Other OTs (8%) want the College to direct education to the public. That includes taking their pulse and promoting the role of the College. As one OT said, “The College exists for the public; you should ask the public what they want.”



# 6

## What the Public Should Know About OTs

Just what should the public know, about both OTs and the College? Registrants expressed particularly strong interest in educating Ontarians about two broad areas: One is the role of OTs, which 66% of respondents mentioned. That includes awareness of occupational therapy services; the wide scope of practice; the OT's contribution to client health; the diverse roles of OTs; the availability and accessibility of OTs; and practice settings.

An OT put it this way – it's important that the public understands “who we are, what we provide and how we can help; many people still have no idea what the role of OT is.”

Health care can only improve when the full range of required services are accessed. That can happen if the public has a clear picture of an OT's role and scope of practice:

- what they can do;
- who they work with;
- how they collaborate with other members of a health care team;
- the distinct roles of (and relationships between) OTs and physiotherapists; and
- what “occupation” really means (it's not just about returning people to work, but, as OTs state, “whole person rehabilitation” and a “return to independence”).

Having that greater understanding would benefit the public good, states an OT. The more informed clients are, the greater the chance they'll want to work with an OT and consent to OT interventions. Another OT talked about illustrating the client-therapist partnership as a way to raise awareness.

But awareness of the profession isn't enough. One in five OTs (21%) also said it's essential to convey the credibility of the OT profession. That means the high level of training; high standards; professional qualifications; and the very fact that OTs are regulated by a College.

“The public needs to be more aware that we are at the similar level of education and clinical preparation as [physiotherapists] PTs,” said one OT.

Another feels that the public should understand not only the strong credentials of OTs, but also “the mandatory QA activities to ensure public safety.” There are advantages to working with a regulated profession, another OT commented, referring to a suite of “core competencies and additional training/competencies.”

While the College doesn't exist to promote OTs, being a regulated profession is a key message. It's the idea, one OT said, "that we are professionals with strict requirements, to ensure that [an] OT can benefit them and [their] family and community."

That can increase confidence in OTs. So can the ability to access information and the notion of accountability. One in 10 (11%) registrants feels the public should be made aware of the public register. "Make it very clear and easy to find OTs."

What's the most important information to include on the public register? Registrants listed contact details; areas of practice; years of practice; educational background; additional designations (for example, certified hand therapist); and any disciplinary actions.

A smaller number of OTs (5%) feel the public needs to understand funding around OT access. That includes the importance of OT coverage in extended health care plans, and the overall "cost-benefit of OTs for health care and wellness." As another registrant said, "There is little value attached to our services due to a lack of understanding of our role, skills and knowledge."



## Responsiveness of the College to OTs

The College's own understanding of OTs, and its ability to serve them, was the subject of the final survey question. By a wide margin, registrants say the College responds well to their needs.

Overall, 59% of survey respondents feel the College is very or fairly responsive to the issues facing their practice, while 18% rate the College as unresponsive. The remainder of respondents weren't sure how to answer the question.

Those who feel positive about responsiveness commented that the College:

- **Provides knowledgeable and helpful responses:** “The College is very aware of the practical issues facing OTs on a day-to-day basis, and can therefore respond in a thoughtful manner.”
- **Gives guidance and regulatory expectations:** “A valuable resource for putting policies in place which guide clinicians in providing safe and ethical services to the public.” Another OT said that “the College offers a variety of different practice resources, documents, modules, and guidelines that clearly outline regulatory expectations for minimum level competency. The standards of practice are imperative to ensuring I am managing my practice appropriately.”
- **Offers relevant updates:** “The College provides information about issues that are current.”
- **Returns calls and emails quickly:** “When I have a question I get a very timely response from the professional practice advisors, which is very helpful.”
- **Delivers useful learning:** “The learning modules are generally right on target for relevant information for practice.”

For those rating the College as relatively unresponsive, the critiques included:

- **Doesn't know the issues facing the clinical environment/daily challenges:** “The College continues to bring standards and guidelines that are unrealistic given the pressures and practice for OTs in the current health care climate. While we all aspire to surpass these standards and guidelines, the current employment contexts do not support the full application.” Another OT said that “unfortunately, the standards both align with and conflict with the reality of my practice.”
- **Lacks clarity in responses:** “The College never provides specifics to anything; it gives vague answers when issues arise.” “I know it is up to me to know practice guidelines but they can be difficult to apply to practice sometimes.”
- **Over-regulates:** “The College spends an incredible amount of time policing us and having us jump through hoops. Quality assurance seems to be overkill for those clinicians practicing effectively. Focus on those who have issues.”
- **Doesn't respond promptly:** “Hard to reach, they take too long to answer back.”
- **Imposes high fees:** “OT College fees are amongst the highest of all health professionals, while the role and scope of OT is limited in comparison.”

Interestingly, some respondents feel that one reason why the College is unresponsive to them is that it's focused on protecting the public. Consider these comments:

- “The College is simply there to protect the public, which is important but is totally unsupportive of OTs.”
- “Have not seen any support from the college in promoting our profession.”
- “I feel the College is more concerned about surveillance of therapists than about meaningfully supporting the work we do.”
- “The College views clients/patients as passive and only in need of protection, and not as active participants in their care.”

Public protection is, in fact, the central duty of the College. This College, and all of the health profession Colleges, carry out the authority to self-regulate by acting in the public interest first and foremost. The College has mandated regulatory responsibilities, and supports public safety by ensuring that these responsibilities are carried out.

As the new Strategic Plan is implemented, the interests of the public – and the ability of OTs to meet those interests with safe, ethical and competent care – will continue to drive the College.



The 2017-2020 Strategic Plan will be finalized in early 2017, and take effect June 1, 2017. The plan will focus on three key areas:

1. confidence in OT regulation;
2. quality practice by occupational therapists; and
3. system impact through collaboration.

Beyond the plan, the College will follow up with OTs to address many of the issues raised in the 2016 survey. Some concerns or hopes expressed in the survey results are outside the College's scope. However, many other points illustrate the need for action and/or for the College to clarify expectations and the reasons behind them. That understanding will help OTs fulfil their professional obligations, and be even more successful at serving the public and meeting their trust.