

CHANGING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTICE

Working With People, Figuring Out Possibilities

Pat Fisher

By Lynn Cockburn and Judith Friedland

Pat Fisher's career as an occupational therapist spanned five decades and influenced hundreds of clients and therapists. Passion, perseverance, organizational and facilitation skills, belief in the power of education, innovation and evolution: these are the characteristics that are embodied in this remarkable woman. She has received awards in recognition for her work and maintained longstanding friendships with fellow occupational therapists. But what stands out when speaking with her is a fundamental conviction that what is unique about occupational therapy is that the individuals who have worked with an occupational therapist say "look what I have been able to do" rather than "the therapist did so-and-so to me."

The importance of working with a person rather than doing to an individual is evident in the stories that she tells about her work as an early occupational therapist which she describes as "toiling in the wilderness" in a small town in Ontario, as a supervisor at various Toronto hospitals and as an educator with the University of Toronto. She recognizes this important yet often unrecognized perspective as being fundamentally different from other health professions and one that occupational therapists bring to their work in all arenas.

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Although she recognizes how much occupational therapy roles have changed over the years, Pat Fisher does not think that the occupational therapist's fundamental goal - assisting people to deal with the complexity of their everyday situations - has really changed. She speaks about working together with her clients to figure out what they needed to do themselves



(L-R) Pat Fisher in 2005 receiving her University of Toronto 60th Year Anniversary Medal from Nancy Christie.

to achieve their goals, not by telling them what to do. From her beginnings in a veteran's hospital in the mid 1940's where she used crafts to help returning soldiers reengage in civilian life, she moved on to community work where she provided services to children and their families. She then took on supervisory and educational positions in large organizations. In each of these roles, she was a facilitator of processes that created positive change.

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But not unlike other occupational therapists, Pat Fisher also admits to times when she did not maintain such a positive attitude and thought of leaving the profession. At some points in her career she felt that the nature of hospital institutions did not support the goals of occupational therapy: "Here we are trying to encourage our patients to be active and creative, and that doesn't always fit with the rules and order that a hospital

wants to maintain. Besides, we generally don't deal with life and death situations; we deal with quality of life – that too, is a different perspective than what is held by many other health professionals". Her eyes then lit up as she said: "But then I realized that this is me" and spoke about how this perspective about the benefits of engagement in occupations was a key part of her life. She obviously enjoyed problem solving with her clients and colleagues to enable that engagement.

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Pat Fisher's perseverance is evident in the key role that she played in the development of the OSOT Perceptual Evaluation Tool Kit and Manual. What began as an idea in the Study Group on the Brain Damaged Adult became a 20-year project. Along with occupational therapy colleagues Marion Boys and Claire Holzberg, she spearheaded a process to develop a tool that therapists could use to better understand the perceptual difficulties that their clients faced. These three occupational therapists, who had little research training, worked with experienced researchers and many practising clinicians to

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carry out a successful initiative resulting in a resource used by many occupational therapists today. "We recognized that this was just a beginning in this area, but we wanted to get something started so that the huge need could be addressed," she said. The results of the study were published in the American Journal of Occupational Therapy in 1988 and a revised version of the manual was published in 1991.

As chair of the Continuing Education Committee at the University of Toronto Department Occupational Therapy for many years, her belief in professional development was clear. She worked tirelessly and with few resources to provide opportunities for learning across a wide variety of interests. Sixteen years after officially retiring from the profession, she continues to be interested and keep up with current ideas in the field. These days she is learning about how society and environments influence health and is thinking about occupational therapy roles as this new knowledge develops. She is optimistic that the profession's ongoing commitment to developing an evidence base is beneficial and will strengthen the understandings of how occupational therapists facilitate change, but she also hopes that the creativity and innovation that have been hallmarks of clinical practice will not be lost.

Through her work with clients, students, colleagues and many others, Pat Fisher has left a legacy. Her emphasis on facilitation and organization helped to create a network of occupational therapists who share a passion and dedication to the profession. Reflecting on her career, she takes little credit for herself, saying how fortunate she was to work with many people who she admired and respected, but does admit that she was a good facilitator and organizer. Pat Fisher represents the many other occupational therapists across the country who have practiced for years, continually learning more about their field and their clients, as well as encouraging and supporting students and colleagues to develop their understanding of activity, occupation and occupational therapy. These practitioners have also found ways to bring a research perspective to their work even when they are not primarily researchers. She has continually reminded the profession of occupational therapy of its possibilities and how it can grow towards its true vision of "assisting people to deal with the complexity of their everyday situations."