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## Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists Position Statement

# Workplace health and occupational therapy

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It is the position of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists that occupational therapists have the knowledge and skills to practice in workplace health. Workplace health incorporates practices, policies, and programs designed to improve the physical, mental and psychosocial health of workers (Canadian Council on Integrated Healthcare, 2002).

Occupational therapy in Canada is based on a model of practice that maintains the interaction between the person and their occupations with the social, cultural, physical and institutional environment. Occupational therapy is uniquely positioned to provide services to workplaces to initiate and develop multiple-level strategies for promotion of employee and organizational health.

### Recommendations

1. Multidisciplinary research be undertaken to understand how work and work environments influence occupational performance, and to understand the relationship between health conditions and environmental factors.
2. Occupational therapists collaborate with workers, work teams, managers, unions, health and safety committees, and health professionals to facilitate the development of healthy work environments.
3. Occupational therapists expand their services in the workplace system to contribute to healthy workers and healthy workplaces.
4. Occupational therapists advocate for workplace health initiatives and research to reduce the impact of illness and disability among residents of Canada.

### CAOT Initiatives

To promote occupational therapy in workplace health, CAOT will:

1. Work in collaboration with federal and provincial governments, health related and non-health related associations, and health research organizations to inform and influence key workplace health policy and research activities.
2. Promote the understanding of the relationship between the environment, occupation, and health.
3. Partner with organizations to develop strategies to promote workplace health.
4. Facilitate or support educational activities that offer professional skills development in areas such as building workplace-based labour and management teams, negotiation and mediation, and application of health and safety legislation.

5. Develop consumer information and practice resources to educate others about the value of occupational therapy in workplace health.
6. Provide occupational therapists with access to research-based evidence in workplace health.

### Background

1. Workplace health strategies have become increasingly important to Canadian businesses. The last two decades have witnessed a change in the nature of work due to factors such as globalization and advances in technology, and in the demographics of the workforce. Correspondingly, the type and incidence of work-related illnesses and injuries have also changed. Health-care spending by the private sector is increasing and was estimated at \$23.9 billion in 1997, representing approximately 31% of total health expenditures in Canada (Health Canada, 2003). Every year, businesses spend over \$11 billion on benefits for employees and the cost of prescription and non-prescription drugs increases by 5-10%. These numbers do not consider the costs of absenteeism, reduced quality, and lost productivity (Health Canada, 2003; Institute for Work and Health, 1998-1999).
2. The Ottawa Charter defines the link between people and their environment as the basis for health promotion. Health is created in the settings of everyday life (World Health Organization, 1986). Working with employers and workers to plan and implement comprehensive wellness strategies, is essential to empowering people to increase control over their health and strengthening community action for health (World Health Organization, 2003).
3. There is a growing recognition that a comprehensive workplace health strategy is required that focuses on both the employee and the organization including the company's culture, policies, and work practices (Solmundson, 2003). Programs such as health and safety, employee assistance, disability management, and injury prevention are examples of individual approaches to manage health, illness and disability. However, an integrated approach to address the complex roles of physical and psychosocial factors in health and safety in the workplace needs to be considered in both practice and research (Institute for Work and Health, 1998-1999).
4. A comprehensive model of workplace health encompasses the physical and social environment, personal health practices and resources (National Quality Institute and Health Canada, 1998). Occupational therapists recognize that the



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health of the employee and the work environment is determined by a range of interacting factors. The choice, performance, organization, and satisfaction in occupations are determined by the relationship between people and their environment (CAOT, 2002). Occupational therapists approach workplace issues with this unique perspective that considers the needs of the individual worker, work group and the organization.

5. The nature of the occupation of work can have a negative impact on employee health. Occupational therapists are skilled in analyzing occupational performance and understanding the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social demands of work in relation to the person's abilities and limitations. Occupational therapy intervention supports a safe and healthy workplace through policies, programs and activities including ergonomics, nutrition and wellness, pain management, stress management, counselling, workplace safety equipment, health and safety policies, and life skills training.
6. Effective wellness initiatives need to be viewed as a management strategy supported by a business case (the cost-benefits of implementation) and measurable outcomes such as attendance, staff retention, and injury, disability and benefit costs. Components of workplace initiatives need to be integrated to address both organizational health and personal health. Occupational therapists can assist employers to determine the needs and concerns of the worker and organization; develop objectives for workplace health initiatives; and design, implement and evaluate programs to meet these objectives (Health Canada, 1999). The profession's belief in the interrelationship among the person, occupation, and the environment uniquely positions occupational therapists to provide quality health-related programs in the workplace.

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