

CAOT Conference 2017: President's address

Let's move forward, let's be accountable

Nicola MacNaughton, CAOT President

Canada, at 150 years of age, is still young as a country yet has established itself on the world stage, with an identity that we have earned and that we own. History indicates we were first noticed for our accomplishments during the defining battle for Vimy Ridge. Some feel we earned a good reputation through our deployment of international peacekeepers. Some would argue that our positive reputation came from legalizing same-sex marriage. Some would say we disappointed regarding climate change. Most would say we disappointed Indigenous people. Whatever makes us Canadian, we own it, we wear it and we are accountable for how we show it. As we celebrate our 150th, we are showing each other and the world how proud we are to be Canadian.

What does that mean – to be accountable – for our reputation and identity as Canadians? For me it means that we take personal responsibility for stating who we are, as Canadians, and how we contribute to a better world. What makes us uniquely Canadian? What is it we do that adds value to the global community? I feel that taking responsibility involves sharing with others what we believe in and what we stand for. In a polite Canadian way, but with the aim to inform and influence. Maybe we do this by having a few select messages that provide evidence and build credibility. Maybe we deliver our words with clarity and confidence. Maybe it comes from believing in ourselves and speaking from the heart.

Now, what about being an occupational therapist? Are we responsible for our profession's reputation, image, identity, and ultimately our success? I believe we are. By influencing others with a few select messages, delivered with clarity and confidence, because we believe in ourselves and our value to the health of Canadians, we will evolve a body of knowledge about occupational therapy that informs and influences others.

The analogy continues. Canada has a small footprint on the world stage. World politics do not revolve around us. And yet Canada covers a huge amount of territory, and offers tremendous value in terms of biodiversity and natural resources such as fresh water, crude oil and maple syrup. You can draw the parallels to occupational therapy. At present, Canadian health care does

not revolve around occupational therapy. Only an estimated .003% of extended health insurance plan dollars is directed towards occupational therapy services. That's a small footprint. Yet occupational therapy offers a huge scope of practice, and it

offers tremendous value—it improves the lives of many, saves money, enables Canadians to live their best lives and provides a career path for those driven by evidence, altruism and humanity. We know this, but who else knows this? How are we delivering this message with one strong voice?

Occupational therapists have been known to indulge in self-restricting behaviours. We have spent an inordinate amount of time trying to explain who we are and what we do. When we say, “we enable the occupations of life,” the public says “what?” Or when we point out that we aren't physiotherapists, the public says “oh”. We are a valued, purposeful and impactful profession

and we know it. However, as we approach 100 years of existence, we are still talking about an identity crisis. Maybe we need to just stop doing that. *Let's move forward. Let's be accountable.*

We are occupational therapists 365 days a year. What if 16,000 Canadian occupational therapists spoke about our value to one person each day? We could create over 5.8 million positive impressions in just one year. If we each shared a story about the positive outcomes that result from occupational therapy interventions, we might just build the momentum we need to break through our current ‘who are you?’ stalemate. Multiply that using the reach of social media and we would be on a path to being a more understood profession with a more supported place in our health care system.

For the last two years, CAOT has encouraged a 31-day challenge during occupational therapy month in October. The ‘ask’ is that CAOT members speak to one person a day about occupational therapy and then share that news using the hashtag #31dayOTchallenge. It's a fun and easy contest. The participation rate has been good and the number of impressions created has been in the millions. My challenge to you is to do this *everyday* of the year – in person, on the phone, on the bus, at the hockey arena and on social media. Articulate the value that occupational



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therapy brings to the health and well-being of Canadians. Turn occupational therapy month on its head – let’s have October be a month when we celebrate all the public awareness building and outreach that we have accomplished throughout the other eleven months of the year. Now *that* would make a difference. *That* would move our profession forward. *That* would make us accountable.

Advocacy is a word that scares many of us. It seems such a ‘loaded’ word although its definition is nothing more than ‘the recommendation of a particular cause or policy.’ We make recommendations all the time – it’s central to our work as occupational therapists. We recommend preventions, treatments, programs and activities that improve our clients’ lives. So, we know how to do this. If we were each to become an advocate for our profession – if we articulated the value of what we are doing to that one person each day – the impact would snowball. But what might we say?

Maybe you’ve recommended a community outreach program and it reduced the number of days a client stayed in the hospital – or maybe your work helped prevent an expensive hospital stay altogether. Maybe the health care system benefited from a lower hospital readmission rate as a result of your treatment. Maybe someone returned to work faster, maybe there were fewer falls that required medical care, maybe medication use decreased or maybe increased mobility meant someone continued to be a safe driver. Tell someone – your neighbour, your physician, your MP or MLA. You improved lives. You saved money. You added value. You are accountable.

CAOT embraces the word advocacy. It is central to the work we do, on behalf of our members and the profession of occupational therapy. We proactively reach out to decision makers and influencers every day. We recommend inclusion of occupational therapy in all relevant health care arenas. We nurture its identity by presenting the stories and facts that articulate its value. We demand better funding.

CAOT understands the challenges of being an advocate. We are a small group representing a large and diverse membership trying to effect change in a complicated and over-burdened system at a time of competition for scarce health care dollars. We meet this challenge by selecting only a few key messages that address the needs of a few select audiences – seniors, Veterans, youth, Indigenous people. We speak up. We amplify the reach of our messages through coalition work and strategic partnerships with health care allies that have similar aims. This is effective.

Recent coalition work resulted in a clear advocacy win. CAOT along with colleagues in G8 and The Organizations for Health Action (HEAL) formed the “Don’t tax my health benefits” coalition and lobbied to protect the tax-free status of employer-sponsored health and dental benefits. The coalition crafted key messages and directed them to the most influential offices. We were rewarded with meetings with relevant MPs, including former interim leader of the opposition Rona Ambrose. CAOT members were urged to get involved in the letter writing campaign. After almost 160,000 campaign letters were sent to government, Prime Minister Trudeau made a February 1st statement that this form of taxation would not be included in the budget and, indeed, it was not.

This returns me to my analogy about being Canadian. Canada, as a smallish player on the world stage amplifies our voice through contributions to coalitions like NATO and the UN and by partnering strategically with bigger, louder forces. Similarly, CAOT can amplify its voice not just through coalition work, but by harnessing the power of 16,000 Canadian occupational therapists. We can become bigger and louder. We have the same

“Be an advocate 365 days of the year”

aims. We have valuable stories and facts to share. We want results. We are accountable.

So, be an advocate 365 days of the year. I think we should consider reserving occupational therapy month, in October, as a 31-day celebration of our year-long advocacy activities and successes. It’s an idea—possibly even a great idea. The CAOT Board wants to gather a whole portfolio of great ideas. It’s our job to listen and respond to our members – what excites them – what are their expectations – what are their expressed needs? The *Great Ideas Portfolio* is a place where members and stakeholders are encouraged to connect with the Board and share their thoughts. We want to be accountable to you.

I have been spreading the word about the Great Ideas Portfolio all year – in my introductory webinar, in my holiday note, during the AGM and now here at conference. Chat with a CAOT Board member any time you have an opportunity. Or just send your idea by email to board@caot.ca. My goal is to move conversations regarding occupational therapy away from, “what is occupational therapy?” and towards something like “how do I access occupational therapy?” and “how do I get more occupational therapists on my team?”

Let’s all be accountable for moving our profession forward. Let’s take responsibility for our advocacy, our great ideas and our future. We are Canadians. We are occupational therapists. I, personally, am so proud to be both.