
DEVELOPING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY (Abstract 15, WFOT, Canada.) MR. J. BUSUTTIL PRINCIPAL O.T.

The island of Malta (population 400,000) has a long history of caring and carers. The presence of the Knights of Malta (1530-1798) greatly enhanced the medical tradition, while the British rule (1800-1964) maintained the island with concurrent developments.

Origins

The development of OT in Malta goes to the introduction of occupation, social and recreational activities which were prescribed for the patients in the local hospital. In 1840, a pioneer Malta psychiatrist, Dr. Tumas Chetcuti, was promoting activities like gardening, domestic work and crafts as part of the treatment programme for patients in the mental hospital. He claimed that such activities were beneficial, resulting in relief, mental stimulation, and a normalising influence on residents.

The psychiatric field continued to expand the activity programme into the industrial occupation of patients when a purpose built hospital was opened in 1861. By the beginning of this century, the hospital was self sufficient in food, clothing and footwear.

Professional Awareness

The first time OT was referred to in a professional manner was 1926. During a visit to the hospital, the island's Governor complained about the lack of indoor occupations for male patients. The medical superintendent stated that difficulties were being encountered to find suitable residents to work with the trade masters and the workshops.

He concluded that "as regards what is known as occupational therapy, we are still far from having a fully organised department," and cited examples from abroad where such therapy was being conducted successfully.

The psychiatric hospital, in a report in 1932, stressed the need for the engagement of Occupations Officer, as occupational therapy had made a significant contribution to the treatment of mental disorder, and had to be introduced on a professional basis. This was the first request in Malta for the recruitment of a qualified occupational therapist. It is significant that around the same time, an official memorandum on occupational therapy for the mental patients published in England, also urged the employment of therapists in psychiatric hospitals.

Action

By the early 1950s, OT had become fairly established as a profession to be found in the major hospitals of developed countries. On an international basis, OT's were organising themselves into a wider platform in order to promote their profession, and the first congress of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists was held in Scotland in 1954 - 44 years ago.

The Maltese medical authorities were now more conscious of this profession, and the lack of OT's in the island was considered officially as a "serious setback". In official correspondence, the absence of OT's was described as detrimental and proving to be a great handicap in the treatment of certain conditions. It was unnecessary prolonging

rendering their hospitalisation unpleasant if not altogether boring. The authorities added that it was a recognised fact that OT was useful and essential to certain patients. To rectify this situation the Ministry of Health in 1955 took steps to start the process of recruiting OT's from the United Kingdom.

The First OT's

Two female therapists arrived in Malta in 1956 to work in the general hospital. The overall plan was for OT to start in a small way, probably with orthopaedic patients, and once established, it would then expand to cover the whole hospital. In those days, many Maltese were not conversant with the English Language, and it was pointed out to the expatriate OT's that as a result, many of the instructions to patients would have to be transmitted visually.

After an initial evaluation the two OT's drafted a short as well as a long term plan for the profession which featured:-

1. The setting up of OT at general hospital for orthopaedic and long-term case.
2. To obtain and equip a department for mobile in and out patients.
3. To expand OT later to the other hospitals i.e. the geriatric and the psychiatric

The plan was approved and put into action.

Evaluation of Services

Within two years, a functional department was set up, servicing both in and out patients. Activities featured printing and crafts like canework and basketry, expanding later to woodwork, as well as a paediatric section. Activities of daily living were also a highlight of the programme.

Liaison with other departments, like the Works Department and the Education Department, were also established.

The OT department was expanding, and a plan was drafted to move into bigger premises, envisaging sufficient space for the activities and equipment already in operation, as well as the accommodation of innovations. Besides covering the general hospital, the expatriate OT's also managed to initiate a service and a department at the geriatric hospital.

However an OT service provided by recruited expatriated, whose number was irregular and whose service was not continuous, was certain to encounter problems. By 1968, both the general and the geriatric hospital were complaining about the quality and quantity of the service: new recruitment ran into problems, and by 1969, both departments had closed down.

Maltese OT's

As far back as 1961, the Health Department invited applications with the aim of "sending two young ladies to the U.K. to undergo a three-year course leading to the OT diploma". In those days OT was deemed as a profession suitable mostly for women. Nothing came out of this call for applications.

The administration found it difficult not only to engage Maltese to study OT, but also to recruit therapists from abroad. This was mainly due to salary conditions which offered no inducement to trained staff to come here, and no encouragement for Maltese to apply for the scholarships.

Another call was made in 1970, when two men were selected to proceed abroad to study for OT qualification. On graduating in 1974 they returned to Malta where they were entrusted with the task of organizing OT on a professional footing locally. One

going into the physical field while the other started looking after mental health. More Maltese were sent to the U.K. to study in 1979.

Local Expansion

Gradually the pioneering Maltese OT's started setting up departments in the main general geriatric and psychiatric hospitals. They were aided by a group of enthusiastic technical staff, who were essential in the implementation of the overall OT strategy.

More OT's were needed however to cover the present and future demands of the services. It was no longer feasible to send Maltese students to study abroad. Plans were drafted for the setting up of a local OT course, a natural progression since similar courses in physiotherapy, podology and speech therapy had also started local education. Also, it was imperative to assess local needs and plan the service and the course accordingly, something which overseas OT colleges do not always take into account because their curriculum is geared towards their respective needs.

The first OT course in Malta took off in 1984. Since then seven other courses have been organized, with about fifty OT's qualifying in the process, and being WFOT recognized.

The Present and Future

With a period of 25 years, OT has become significantly established as a recognised profession in the health care field locally. Departments have been set up in the major facilities : the general hospital, the geriatric hospital, the psychiatric hospital, an elderly rehabilitation complex, a hospice facility, facilities in the sister island of Gozo, as well as in the community.

OT in Malta is not without its problems : we have difficulties with resources, both infrastructural and staffing. But looking back over this quarter century, as well as encompassing the present and future plans, we feel proud of what we have achieved both locally, as well as abroad, for sometimes our expertise in the pioneering field is requested by the other developing countries.