Founding faculty member retires

By Katelyne Northum, reprinted with permission from Dal News

At the end of May, over 500 occupational therapists gathered in Halifax to take part in the Canadian Association for Occupational Therapy (CAOT) conference. It is the fourth time that the national association has held an OT conference in the city, and it is particularly significant this year with the imminent retirement of Dr. Elizabeth Townsend, current director of the School of Occupational Therapy at Dalhousie and one of the founding faculty members of the school.

Since 1982, Dalhousie University’s School of Occupational Therapy has been turning out world-class occupational therapists who have gone on to have successful careers in many different fields. Dr. Townsend was instrumental in the opening of the school, which has now produced over 1,000 alumni and remains the only school for occupational therapy in the Atlantic provinces.

“I was tantalized by the possibility of creating a vibrant new curriculum particularly that would bring out the possibilities for occupational therapy,” she says of her decision to get involved in the school so many years ago, which has helped to significantly increase the number of occupational therapists who live and work in the region.

Occupational therapy is defined by CAOT as “the art and science of enabling engagement in everyday living, through occupational engagement to perform the occupations that foster health and wellbeing; and of enabling a just and inclusive society so that all people may participate to their potential in the daily occupations of life.”

“It’s one of the broadest and most flexible professions anywhere,” says Dr. Townsend, explaining that occupational therapists don’t only work in hospitals, but in many different sectors such as transportation. Her research has focused on areas of mental health and the ways in which mental health systems either support or limit possibilities for people to live well. “It was out of doing that critique and analysis that I realized that the philosophic foundations of occupational therapy are congruent with philosophic ideas of social justice.”

“I was attracted to occupational therapy because I saw the possibility of making a difference by seeing the potential in people that others couldn’t see.”

Elizabeth Townsend (centre) is joined by colleagues Mary Lam from McMaster (left) and Helene Potolakij of the University of Toronto (right) as she delivers her keynote speech.

Dr. Townsend says the opportunities that Dalhousie provided her during her time here have opened many doors. “My time at Dalhousie has been characterized by incredible opportunities to be creative, to create an innovative curriculum, to make international connections, and to become involved in the national scene in shaping what we do to help people live a more meaningful life, even when they have what would seem to others to be challenges.”

She has nothing but good things to say about the many students who have come through the school during her time there. “My experience is of huge pride. There is a sense of putting Dalhousie on a world stage where our alumni are highly respected around the world. I get letters from students in New Zealand, Australia, or India saying how proud they are of being a Dalhousie occupational therapy graduate.”

Professor Townsend will remain at Dalhousie as a professor emeritus. She encourages students to look at occupational therapy as a possible career choice, citing the ability for thinking outside of the box, a willingness to use both sides of the brain and to work across disciplines, a passion for advancing justice in the world, and creativity as characteristics of potentially great occupational therapists.

There are all areas Dr. Townsend knows a thing or two about. Crystal Cinas, an assistant professor in the department, says that many view Dr. Townsend as a visionary. “She has a view to the future of what’s possible.”

Driving towards a unique training program

McGill University, in partnership with the Société de l’assurance automobile du Québec, the Ordre des ergothérapeutes du Québec and the Constance Lethbridge Rehabilitation Centre (CLRC) has created a unique higher education training program in driving rehabilitation for occupational therapists.

This program aims at training qualified professionals with a expertise, based on evidence, which will enable them to effectively intervene in driving screening and evaluation, and retraining and vehicle adaptation for different targeted populations. The program is offered in English and in French and includes five courses. The courses are accessible by Internet and some are complemented by practical workshops supervised by expert clinicians. This training program will furnish the student with the necessary tools enabling them to play a leading role in this sector, as part of their profession. Information on the program is available at www.mcgill.ca/spot/gradprogram/.

ACOTUP

NEWSLETTER – Summer 2010

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The CUFE meeting was also very productive and covered a variety of topics, beginning with a report from the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapy (CAOT). Megram and the executive for their support. Collinson reported that ACOTUP is progressing well and that the committee meetings are a great opportunity to share and have been very successful. New governance structure is coming along well and she thanked Megram and the executive for their support over the year. A revised executive director description was circulated to members. It was determined council would start the hiring process and the executive would create an advertisement to be circulated to the members and posted on the ACOTUP and possibly the CAOT website.

The ACOTUP education committee met for its first face-to-face meeting in Halifax, NS during the CAOT conference this past May. The meeting on the schedule and was attended by 12 members along with Bonnie James and Paula Ingls from the association management firm Megram Consulting Services Ltd. The president’s report was circulated prior to the meeting. Donna Collins reported that ACOTUP is progressing well and that the committee meetings are a great opportunity to share and have been very successful. The new governance structure is coming along well and she thanked Megram and the executive for their support over the year. A revised executive director description was circulated to members. It was determined council would start the hiring process and the executive would create an advertisement to be circulated to the members and posted on the ACOTUP and possibly the CAOT website.

The communication plan prepared by Megram for the council was discussed and it was suggested that special projects would be a separate committee with the executive director that would include completing the communication plan priority list. It was decided the website would be a top priority and each council member would further review the communication plan.

Nominations were accepted for the executive committee. The motion to accept the nominations of Tal Jan, president; Susan Rappolt, vice chair; Margaret Jamieson, treasurer for the 2010-2011 term; Bernardette Nofeld, treasurer for the 2011-2012 term; Tanya Packer, research committee liaison; and Lili Liu, education committee liaison was moved by Martin Brousseau and seconded by Sandra Everit and duly carried.

A special presentation was made to Dr. Liz Townsend in recognition of her retirement as director of the School of Occupational Therapy at Dalhousie University. (See article in this issue).

Outside of meetings, members were able to enjoy the Nova Scotia hospitality, scenery, culture and culinary delights. Activities include boat tours, visits to area museums and even the Alexander Keith’s brewery. Several members went on a haunted walk around the city and enjoyed intriguing stories of ghostly buildings, troubled spirits and odd occurrences.

“The haunted walk was a fun evening that provided the opportunity to see the “dark” side of Halifax,” says Tal Jan. “With a great story telling and wonderful companies of fellow OTs we strolled around Halifax to discover that there is life after conference. This tour allowed us to discover which OT members are braver than others!”

Everyone also took advantage of the abundance of seafood, with some attendees even taking it upon themselves to bring some live Atlantic lobsters home.

Thirty-two ACOTUP members gathered in Halifax for this year’s annual meeting. With filled agendas and short CUBE, education, curriculum and research committees discussed a wide variety of issues to further the associations’ goal of uploading educational standards for the occupational therapy profession.

All committees met over the May weekend (May 28-30) prior to the council meeting on May 31. This included the education and research committees, both of which are still getting off the ground, and they continued the work of establishing bylaws, terms of reference, objectives and goals. The national curriculum coordinators meeting was well-attended and began with small group discussions on program curriculum success stories, challenges and new program/curriculum initiatives. The group then defined the role of the curriculum committee which includes developing linkages for support, developing standards, providing consistency by coordinating and assisting the program coordinators in giving guidance to other organizations, and identifying national programs. A discussion then took place regarding the CAOT exam blueprint and how this may impact the occupational therapy curriculum. The CUBE meeting was also very productive and covered a variety of topics, beginning with a report from the Canadian Guidelines for Fieldwork Education in Occupational Therapy (CGFEOET) Task Force about the research recommendations. It became apparent very quickly that further dialogue would be needed on the topic and members hope to organize an gathering in the future to allow for these conversations to move forward. This tour allowed us to discover which OT members are braver than others!”

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