Who Originated the Term Occupational Therapy?

Bing's Nationally Speaking article "The Subject Is Health: Not of Facts, but of Values" (October 1986) repeats the common assumption that "Dr. Dunton, as we know, created the term occupational therapy" (p. 669). Although Dunton does use the term in his 1915 book, Occupational Therapy: A Manual for Nurses, he himself reports that George E. Barron was the first to use the term (Dunton & Licht, 1950).

Support for this statement is found in Barron's own writings. In Teaching the Sick (1919), Barron reports, "the term occupational therapy was first used by the author [Barron] at a conference of hospital workers called by the Massachusetts State Board of Insanity at Boston, December 28, 1914" (Barron, 1919).

In light of this document it would appear that the assumption that Dunton originated the term occupational therapy needs to be rectified and Barron be properly acknowledged as the source of the term.

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References


The Author's Response

On another occasion I commented that when tracing certain occupational therapy events, "one must accept a fair number of ambiguities and a certain degree of messiness, closely akin to what is created by the beginner in fingerprinting" (Bing, 1981, p. 500). This is the kind of situation we run into when attempting to determine the origin of the term occupational therapy.

Dr. Breines could be considered correct, as far as her references encouraged her to go. Two rather extensive searches in 1959-1961 and 1980-1981 led me to a different conclusion; yet there still may be room for doubt. I once chronicled Dr. William Rush Dunton's life and his significant contributions to the care of institutionalized mentally ill persons and his significant involvement in occupational therapy. I had the great privilege to live with him for a number of months, to interview him extensively, and to thoroughly research his huge amount of personal papers (Bing, 1961). My 1980-1981 explorations resulted in the 1981 Eleanor Clarke Slagle lectureship (Bing, 1981).

One way to approach the probable authorship of the term in question is to seek the origins of the two words, occupational and therapy. Manual occupations figured prominently in Pinel's writings, most particularly in Medical Philosophical Treatise on Mental Aliena tion (Pinel, 1801). An elaboration on the occupations concepts can be found in Pinel's later writing, Treatise on Insanity, which was republished in 1862. Samuel Tuke, a devout English Quaker and the 1792 founder of the York retreat, wrote that occupations were used as a means for the sufferer to gain control over the mental disorder through regaining the "habit of attention." "Regular employment is perhaps the most efficacious, and those kinds of employment to be preferred are accompanied by considerable actions" (Tuke, 1813, p. 156).

William Charles Ellis, an obscure English physician, and his wife, who was known as a workwoman, employed what they termed "useful occupations" as "gainful employment of patients on a large scale and even had them taught a trade" (Ellis, 1838, p. 62).

The terms therapy and therapeutic did not appear until the very late 1800s and early 1900s. Dr. Kathryn Reed and I serendipitously uncovered therapeutic occupations in an 1898 report; however, neither of us, at this writing, has been able to retrieve the primary source, William Rush Dunton, Jr., now enters the story. Employed in 1895 as an Assistant Physician at Sheppard Asylum (renamed Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in 1898) in Towson, Maryland, he was introduced to the concept of therapeutic occupations by the distinguished superintendent, Edward N. Brush, MD, who became his mentor. Brush was the founder of "The Sheppard Way," which was a revival of more humane care, including occupations. He declared, "No one appreciates more fully than an asylum medical officer the value of occupations and no one more fully realizes the very complex and difficult elements involved in solving the question of occupations" (Sheppard Asylum, 1895, p. 19).

During Dunton's early tenure at Sheppard Asylum, he was involved in a variety of tasks, such as implementing a clinical pathology laboratory; investigating Kraepelin's classifications of mental illness, dementia praecox, cardiac diseases, and epilepsy; admin-