The vision of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy (AJOT) is to become "a major force in developing the clinical scholarship of the profession, as evidenced by widespread creation, application, and teaching of integrated knowledge and practice. In doing so, AJOT will enhance the validity, effectiveness, recognition, and quality of occupational therapy contributions to health, wellness, productivity, and quality of life" (Corcoran, 2004, p. 127). In keeping with that vision, several topics have been introduced in this editorial space—perhaps most frequently discussed is the topic of evidence-based practice. This topic supports the AJOT vision in that clinical scholars use evidence in a process of "continually comparing, contrasting, updating, and reflecting" on the application of evidence to practice (Corcoran, 2003, p. 607). Most of the editorials on evidence-based practice to date have been directed at practitioners in an effort to help busy professionals identify and use information, appraise the literature, and contribute to the collective research agenda of the profession.

Although important, this is a rather one-sided view of the process of translating evidence to practice, which is actually a shared responsibility of both researchers and those who use the research (National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research [NCDDR], 1996). For that reason, this editorial is directed toward researchers whose intention is to create and disseminate information that is valuable and applicable to practice and the classroom. A caveat is in order here—translation of knowledge requires hard work, effort, and networking, whereas dissemination is comparatively easy.

The NCDDR distinguishes dissemination from the term knowledge translation. Whereas dissemination suggests an effort to spread information widely, knowledge translation describes a broad approach that involves the user as well as the researcher to address the problem of underutilizing evidence-based research (Davis, as cited by NCDDR, 2006). In a 1996 literature review, NCDDR defined one aspect of the problem of underutilized evidence as an overreliance on dissemination; with a dissemination approach, evidence is published to "get it out there." Louis (as cited in NCDDR, 1996) criticized this notion of disseminating knowledge as if it were a "thing that simply needs to find a good home" (p. 6) and talks about the fallacy of "casting knowledge out into the world of practice, under the theory that a good idea would ultimately be used" (p. 6). Instead, she proposed that knowledge should be conceptualized as "definable, useable units that can be arrayed in front of practitioners who will then find among them something to solve their problems" (p. 6). Such a philosophy would lead a researcher to consider carefully who the target audience is, their likely concerns about practice (or teaching), and how the research findings will address those concerns. If the researcher does not consider or clearly understand the audience's concerns, the information will not be regarded as relevant. In the words of Becker (cited in NCDDR, 1996), "People and organizations develop the energy to change when faced with real pain" (p. 7), so the researcher must understand the source of that pain and offer a usable unit of information to resolve it.

How can researchers learn about the concerns of their audience and test their responses to evidence generated from a study? One way is to understand more about which topics are being sought by users of major databases, such as OTseeker (see Bennett et al., this issue). Proponents of knowledge translation would say that users' preferences and perspectives must be involved in all aspects of the study, beginning with its initial conceptualization. The concept of knowledge translation focuses the process on the users of research, including practitioners and consumers, and
involves those users in all aspects of the research. Therefore, knowledge translation emphasizes not only quality in research but also implementation of the resulting evidence within a system (Davis, as cited in NCDDR, 2006). The Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) characterized knowledge translation as “an active and manipulated process that involves all steps between the creation of new knowledge and its application and use to yield beneficial outcomes to society” (CIHR, cited in NCDDR, 2006, “How Is Knowledge Translation Defined” section, paragraph 5). This definition suggests a purposeful approach that involves active participation of information recipients in all phases of research.

To establish these partnerships of audience and researchers, NCDDR has formed communities of practice as the keystone of their knowledge translation initiative. According to Wenger (n.d.), “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Similar to naturally occurring communities that exist everywhere, communities of practice share knowledge and insight regarding an area of mutual interest. The difference between a community of practice and a similar community, such as an interest group or journal club, is the characteristic of having a common practice. As practitioners, they can share resources, problems, experiences, strategies, and tools. A community of practice is a rich forum for researchers who study practice-related questions and for practitioners to dialogue and collaborate. Communities of practice do not necessarily lead to participatory action research (PAR). In PAR, the research model supports the group in enacting a local, active approach to inquiry—therefore, the group members are usually the researchers and participants simultaneously. However, in a community of practice that does not use PAR, the group members share insight and experiences that shape the research study, but do not serve as participants. In the study by Segal and Beyer (this issue), participants were occupational therapists and the research was designed to understand their perceptions of issues that hinder or facilitate parental adherence to home treatment programs. The occupational therapists did not form a community of practice, although Segal and Beyer elicited their detailed perspectives on strategies for helping parents to invest in the home programs. A similar strategy was used by Hooper (this issue) in her case study of teaching practices and by Provident (this issue) in her study of the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) curriculum mentoring project. By virtue of the methodology, these three naturalistic studies provided insight as to the daily issues encountered by practitioners and educators, and the strategies used to address them. Knowledge translation could have been further supported via a follow-up focus group, individual interviews, or a consensus panel at the conclusion of each study, designed to link study findings with the participants’ professional concerns, and to derive implications for a broader audience. This approach would need to be planned in the start-up phases of the study in order to assure that sufficient time and resources are available.

Abreu (this issue) speaks of communities in a slightly different manner, discussing how four places shaped her personal and professional identities. Part of that early identity was her deep conviction to pursue knowledge translation between occupational therapist and client, based partly on the observation that medical jargon and an attitude of authority observed in others was counterproductive to rehabilitation. Finally, the pinnacle of Abreu’s career is characterized by knowledge translation at the core of her position as a collaborative research scientist. Abreu offers an outstanding exemplar of the potential for professional satisfaction related to knowledge translation and the power associated with adopting this type of approach in her research efforts.

Researchers should think about knowledge translation broadly in terms of their identity as a scholar and specifically relative to individual projects. The process of knowledge translation requires a multilevel approach that involves prolonged interactions with a range of individuals and reflection on the effectiveness of self in relation to others. In any research study, representatives of the target audience should be involved in the planning and interpretation of the study. One strategy, a community of practice, can be very informal and may spark interactions leading to knowledge translation. Why not start one in your area? Other strategies include building feedback opportunities, such as debriefing meetings or focus groups, into the study timeframe itself. These strategies can lead to translation of small but relevant units of knowledge that make a huge impact on professional behaviors. ▲

References


