

Occupational Therapist



Health
South Western Sydney
Local Health District

What is an Occupational Therapist?

An occupational therapist is a health professional who specialises in helping an individual person who has an injury, illness or a disability which affects their ability to undertake tasks of everyday life such as eating, showering, shopping and going to work. Occupational therapists are able to work in many different areas such as hospitals, community centres, mental health units, nursing homes, & various corporate companies such as insurers & councils/authorities. As an occupational therapist you can work with babies, children, adults & the elderly.

Assessment & Therapy to:

- Assist people to regain lost physical function e.g. after a car accident so that they can regain personal care skills such as eating & dressing
- Encourage people to gain, or regain, self-confidence in social & work environments through individual & group therapy sessions
- Visit homes to advise on home modifications, such as rails to support an elderly person when walking down steps
- Suggest, design & adapt equipment which allows greater independence for the individual, i.e. a wheelchair, special cutlery which is easy to hold
- Fabrication of splints for individuals with decreased hand/arm function ie. after a stroke, hand trauma
- Assist children with physical disabilities & learning difficulties in the school setting

Education & Consultation to:

- Give advice/education to carers on how to care for a person with an illness, injury or disability
- Assess the ability of injured workers i.e. back injury to return to their usual employment or to perform alternative duties
- Advise authorities on the design & modification of the environment to allow for better access & independence i.e. disabled access toilets, ramps in front of buildings
- Visit workplaces to advise on the use of safe work practices & recommendation of ergonomic equipment such as desk set up, keyboards, chairs etc

Other roles of an Occupational Therapist

- Conduct tests to assess functional, emotional, psychological, developmental and physical capabilities
- Plan and direct specific therapeutic programs for individuals using vocational (jobs or careers), recreational, remedial, social and educational activities
- Select and design a variety of activities that improve an affected movement or function and help individuals to regain personal care skills, such as eating and dressing
- Assist people to gain, or regain, skills in social, leisure and work environments through graded individual or group therapy and activity programs
- Monitor the progress of individuals and assist with the coordination of an effective health team
- Assist children with disabilities to integrate into education programs in schools
- Assess the ability of injured workers to return to their usual employment or to perform alternative duties
- Design and modify the everyday environment of clients to allow for better access and independence

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Adapted from Australian Government Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations Job Guide <http://www.jobguide.thegoodguides.com.au/> and reviewed by SWSLHD staff

- Advise on the use of specialised equipment, such as home modifications, adapted kitchen utensils, wheelchairs and other assistive technologies, which help people within their environment
- Assess the need for, develop and run health education programs
- Act as consultants to industry and government organisations
- Undertake research
- Teach in academic institutions
- Assist in policy development for health and other areas.

Areas of Work

These are some examples in SWSLHD

- Emergency Departments/ Ambulatory Care
- Aged Care Units
- Surgical/Medical wards
- Rehabilitation Units
- Driver Assessment & Rehabilitation
- Brain Injury Units
- Paediatrics (Mental Health units)
- Various community based services
- Hand/Rheumatology clinics
- Children)
- Palliative Care/Oncology (Cancer) Units

Career Opportunities

Occupational Therapy is very diverse, so there is plenty of opportunity to work in many different settings. As you develop your skills there is opportunity to develop as a specialist clinician or to diversify to other areas such as management, education and research. Occupational therapists work in public and private health care organisations. These may include general and children's hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centres, day care centres, community health centres, municipal councils, primary and secondary schools, prisons, centres for people with various disabilities, independent living centres and other organisations. Occupational therapists may also work in private practice as clinicians, consultants or as injury management advisers.

Qualifications Required

To become an occupational therapist you usually have to study occupational therapy at university. Prerequisite subjects, or assumed knowledge, in one or more of biology, chemistry, and an approved first aid certificate are normally required. The various universities have different prerequisites and some have flexible entry requirements.

- Bachelor of Applied Science (Occupational Therapy)
- Bachelor of Health Science (Occupational Therapy) The degree is a 4-year course, which is offered at a number of universities in NSW.

Throughout your training you will be required to complete placements in health settings such as a hospital or community centre. Clinical placements are an opportunity to apply theory to practise and to develop good communication and hands on skills.

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Specialisations

An occupational therapist may specialize in areas such as:

- Aged care providing programs and equipment for people with medical and social problems associated with ageing.
- Disabilities working with people who have an intellectual, physical or sensory disability through planned activity programs over long periods of time.
- General medicine working in hospitals or private practice to assess and treat individuals with physically disabling diseases or injuries.
- Occupational health assessing the safety of work environments and injured workers, providing rehabilitation and advice on adaptations to the workplace.
- Health promotion assisting people who want to achieve a balanced and healthy lifestyle.
- Pediatrics working in hospitals, private practices or schools to assess and treat children with disabilities, developmental delays or learning difficulties.

Supervision provided

A comprehensive orientation program is provided for all new staff members with ongoing support through the SWSLHD clinical supervision process.

What sort of person should I be?

- Patient
- Innovative
- Flexible in approach to situations
- Observant
- Enjoy being with people

Personal skills required of an Occupational Therapist

- Good interpersonal and high level communication skills
- Good problem solving ability
- Able to work independently and as part of a team
- Able to accept and work with people from all cultures and beliefs
- patience, initiative, flexible attitude
- practical, innovative and observant