COT editorial Jo Adams Professor of Musculoskeletal Health Faculty of Health Sciences University of Southampton



**Being useful: why clear, understandable research that communicates our usefulness matters**

Barack Obama recently stated that the advice he gives to his daughters is “ Be useful. And be kind” (<http://www.thewrap.com/president-obamas-running-wild-with-bear-grylls-episode-kills-it-on-social-media-video/> accessed 3.2.2016). This rather humble and uncontentious advice caught my eye as an occupational therapy researcher. If I think about what our research teams endeavor to clarify it is predominantly to explore whether we have been useful (or not) in the areas that we, and our stakeholders think are meaningful and important. Whilst we may know that we can make a substantial difference on a daily basis to a huge number of people (and we do), can we clearly demonstrate and communicate that occupational therapists and our services are being useful to our stakeholders? Engaging and applying robust research approaches can help in clearly and objectively communicating our usefulness to those who commission occupational therapy services.

Our stakeholders are a broad group of people and we need to be aware of their agendas, political drivers, language and priorities. Strong political, economic and professional drivers usually provide the impetus for funded research. A confident, ambitious, forward and externally focused profession is one that is able to externally translate what we do and welcome multi-disciplinary team working. Providing clear, simple evidence, written in accessible language that can communicate the profession’s usefulness, credibility and relevance to our stakeholders is arguably one of the most important ongoing challenges for us all.

The opportunity to work in multi-agency research teams is an opportunity that we should continue to encourage. These collaborations can serve as effective platforms to demonstrate how occupational therapy can contribute and be useful to large national and international health and social care agendas. Designing and carrying out applied research can identify which occupational therapy approaches are most effective and provide qualitative in depth understanding and insight into individual’s experiences of our services. This will serve as important evidence to shape, design and future proof our occupational therapy services.

Research is not easy to do but it can be extremely inclusive. All occupational therapists can engage with research. An openness to question practice, reflect on the evidence for the effectiveness of what we do, learn from what has already been researched and evaluate occupational therapy services at a local level all contribute. None of the research with which I have been involved could have been contemplated without the tremendous support and engagement of clinical colleagues prepared to have their current occupational therapy practices scrutinised and researched. This boldness is rewarded, as where occupational therapy has been shown to have clear clinical and cost benefit (e.g. Lamb et al 2014; Logan et al., 2010) then the argument for continuing the commission of proven effective occupational therapy services is highly persuasive.

Communicating that occupational therapy is useful beyond our own profession requires us to be ambitious and politically astute. An awareness of the external drivers on our professional practice will help us frame this approach. A confident, healthy profession can use the previous work and debate on who and what we are to move on to clearly show that our services should be commissioned as they are useful to the people we serve. A keen awareness of the political and social drivers within which we work is vital in order to design and develop credible research. Research can then be used to reliably and clearly demonstrate where we provide services that are essential and fit for purpose in a changing health and social care system.

There are various opportunities for those seeking to gain experience and skills in research; national student internship programmes are available funded PhD opportunities through the College of Occupational Therapy, National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) and individual higher education institutions;

We already have some outstanding occupational therapy research role models. Opportunities such as these listed above can help support and develop our profession’s next generation of occupational therapy researchers able to demonstrate and articulate that what we do is useful and relevant to a dynamic health and social care environment.

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REFS

Lamb, S.E. et al., (2014) Exercises to improve function of the rheumatoid hand (SARAH): a randomised controlled trial. The Lancet DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)60998-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736%2814%2960998-3)

Logan P., et al., (2010) Community falls prevention for people who call an emergency ambulance after a fall: randomised controlled trial *BMJ* 2010; 340 doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.c2102