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Continuing Competence and Expertise – A Life Long Journey of Career Transitions

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Occupational therapists, just like anyone else, experience career transitions. Some transitions are anticipated, such as moving from the role of student to practising therapist (Tryssenaar & Perkins, 2001) and preparing for retirement (Pettican & Prior, 2011). Other transitions are actively sought out, such as changing practice contexts or applying new evidence to practice. These can lead to rapid knowledge acquisition and enhanced competence (Nicholson, 1994; O'Brien, Cooke & Irby, 2007). Some are unexpected, and occupational therapists, like many others in the workforce, may adjust without even being aware that they are going through a transition (Nicholson, 1994). Oftentimes, occupational therapists may only be somewhat aware of the implications of a crisis to their practice, such as in the ever-increasing number of opioid overdoses, and require the same rapid knowledge acquisition to adjust to new roles. And then there are those transitions that are a result of shifts in society's values, such as Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD), which may require additional personal supports and professional resources not previously imagined.

The College of Occupational Therapists of British Columbia (COTBC), the provincial regulatory body established to protect the public, is interested in transitions because of their connection to safe, ethical, and effective care (Teunissen & Westerman, 2011). Depending on the number of transitions experienced, and one's ability to adapt to the transitions, a health professional may experience undue stress, even burnout, and a reduced ability to provide safe and effective care (Gupta, Paterson, Lysaght, & Von Zweck, 2011; Shanafelt, Bradley, Wipf & Back, 2002;

Westerman et al., 2013). However, with the appropriate personal supports, professional resources and system support structures, occupational therapists can recognize, prepare for and take action to manage transitions, thereby maintaining competence and reducing risks to their client's safety.

One key resource COTBC offers to help guide occupational therapists' reflection on transitions is the Annual Continuing Competence Review (ACCR), part of their Quality Assurance Program (QAP). Implemented in 2013, the ACCR has two parts. The first focuses on asking occupational therapists to review their current practice roles, and identify transitions and supports/resources that may affect their competence both positively and negatively. A list of transitions is provided, including professional ones identified in the literature and by occupational therapists in BC (Herold & Takahashi, 2012) that may affect competence, as well as personal ones, such as returning from parental or medical leave. The latter recognizes that checking regularly on health and wellbeing is an appropriate support to assuring continued competence (Williams & Flanders, 2016). The list of supports and resources was generated through the same process, and occupational therapists are asked to choose those that will assist in the management of their identified transitions.

This strengths-based approach positions transitions as important triggers and opportunities for focused continuing professional development, rather than simply as risks to competence. By asking occupational therapists to regularly reflect on their transitions and build resources that can support the development of adaptive strategies, occupational therapists can continuously improve their competence and expertise and in turn the quality of occupational therapy care in BC. The College recognizes that transitions are considered complex and individual, and adapting is not the simple pairing of transitions with supports and resources. The ACCR is considered a starting point so that occupational therapists are prepared by anticipating changes, considering options and reflecting on the meaning of the

transitions, consistent with Cole and MacDonald's (2011) study of retiring occupational therapists.

The second part of the ACCR, a practice quiz, is designed to alert occupational therapists of possible transitions resulting from newly released practice standards or changes in legislation such as naloxone administration. Occupational therapists are presented with cases and questions to test their ability to apply new legislation to practice. They receive immediate feedback on the correctness of their answers, along with detailed College explanations and links to relevant resources, which encourages further learning to enhance competence.

The perceived value of the ACCR for occupational therapists has been positive over the years. In 2017 close to 92% agreed or strongly agreed that the content of the transition section was relevant to their continued competence and 90% agreed or strongly agreed that the practice quiz was helpful in clarifying regulatory and practice issues. The number of occupational therapists expressing an intention to change their practice based on the ACCR has increased each year, and in 2017, 83% agreed or strongly agreed to do so in the coming year. (COTBC, 2017)¹

It comes as no surprise that the workplace both creates transitions and offers structural support. The top three transitions identified each year related to systems issues: 34% identified an increase in complex issues; 22% identified new policies and procedures; and 20% identified organizational changes leading to less contact with peers, and increased isolation (COTBC, 2017). Aggregate data such as this can help inform COTBC's work with other occupational therapy organizations and employers who are also vested in developing appropriate structures and supports to maintain and enhance occupational therapists' competence. Mentorships, supervised training and courses to acquire new skills were sparse for some of the occupational therapists participating in the competence improvement component of

¹ Based on a response rate of 41-42% to the evaluation form.

the QAP. However, with over 65% of occupational therapists reporting on the 2017 ACCR that they access at least 10 resources to support their transitions (COTBC, 2017), the public can be assured that occupational therapists are utilizing a variety of formal and informal strategies to continue their professional development.

Occupational therapists need to be able to deliver safe and quality care throughout their careers, regardless of role, practice context, organizational change or personal factors that may impact practice. If occupational therapists regularly track transitions and foster resources to support these, they will be better prepared to maximize the positive impacts with minimal disruption to safe, effective and ethical care. From a public protection standpoint, this is an important aspect of professional accountability. Transitions and the construct of continuing competence are complex and variable, and improved practices and client safety issues require the College to continue to refine its efforts and engage other stakeholders in the process. The College looks forward to contributing to and utilizing the growing evidence and theory informing transitions.

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