



Letter to the Editor

The Professional Landscape of Occupational Therapy in the Philippine Mental Health System

Ma. Patricia Nicole Roraldo^{1,2,5}, Camille Anne Guevara^{1,2,3,5}, Rod Charlie Delos Reyes^{1,2,3,4}, Nuruh-Raina Aluk^{1,2,3}

¹Philippine Academy of Occupational Therapists-Mental Health Special Interest Group; ²Filipino Occupational Therapists for Mental Health; ³University of the Philippines Manila; ⁴University of Santo Tomas; ⁵Mariveles Mental Wellness and General Hospital

Correspondence should be addressed to: Ma. Patricia Nicole Roraldo,^{1,2,5}; nicoleroraldo@gmail.com

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The relationship between mental health and occupational therapy (OT) in the Philippines is marked by several challenges and opportunities. Mental health is not merely the absence of mental conditions but encompasses a continuum of well-being that influences an individual's ability to navigate life's challenges.¹ Similarly, occupational therapy focuses on health-promoting occupations and their impact on an individual's environment and well-being.²

In the current mental health system, integrating occupational therapy is as rare as the artisanal salt, Asin Tibuok. It exists, but it is uncommon for people to know about its importance to the Philippine culture, or in this case, the health system, in light of the relative legislative context.^{3,4} If you are not aware of what Asin Tibuok is, then that is exactly the point that we are driving at. Occupational Therapists are not mentioned as part of the primary mental health providers in the Mental Health Law, alongside psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, social workers, and guidance counselors, despite having occupational outcomes dynamically integrating the service-users' rights across all

interventions. This provided a timely opportunity for mental health occupational therapists to inform the general public about the professional landscape of occupational therapy in the Philippine mental health setting by launching an event.

An event was conducted towards the end of September 2023 to launch the Mental Health Special Interest Group (MH SIG) under the national organization of occupational therapists in the Philippines. This was spearheaded by the Filipino OT for Mental Health (FOT4MH) and Open Arms Organization, together with other therapist-led groups focused on mental health. Aside from officially launching the MH SIG, the event aimed to raise awareness regarding the various roles of occupational therapists in mental health practice in the Philippines, including promoting the marginalized occupational therapy mental health practice settings in the Philippines, in light of the country's sociopolitical and legislative context. The event consisted of two main parts: an introduction to the Mental Health Act³ and a panel discussion from mental health

occupational therapists and their current roles in practice. To understand the roles that occupational therapists play in the mental health field, the general routine that occupational therapists do at work, their perceived supports and challenges encountered in practice, and their motivation for engaging in the mental health practice were some of the questions asked during the panel discussion. Despite focusing on occupational therapy in mental health, attendees were noted to be from different practice settings, such as pediatrics and the academe, alongside students who were interested in the mental health field.

Occupational therapists are experts in health-promoting occupations and its impact towards a person, group, or population's environment and safety. Mental health occupational therapy interventions influence more practical, purposeful, and person-centered outcomes. Regrettably, the competencies of occupational therapists across the Philippine mental health system are not integrated or identified as vital to the pragmatic regard toward rights-based mental health programs.

Key themes have emerged concerning the impact of the Mental Health Act on the OT profession through the panel discussion and reflection among the authors. While the law has broadened the scope of OT practice and underscored the significance of occupations in mental health, persistent challenges remain. The issues that were raised focused largely on the discrimination and lack of integration of occupational therapists in the Mental Health Act due to limited awareness of and inexplicit inclusion of the profession, sparse opportunities for collaborations, minimal documentation of effective occupational therapy interventions, insufficiency in government positions due to the slow recruitment process, and a mental health system that is limited to symptom reduction. Furthermore, additional insights gleaned from discussions with experts underscore the intersecting challenges of mental health within sociopolitical contexts. These include concerns regarding economic costs, the necessity for

Interprofessional Education (IPE) in mental health teams, service delivery gaps, occupational deprivation in specific populations (such as children in conflict with the law), and the pivotal role of OTs in crisis intervention and disaster response.

However, there is a growing acknowledgment among occupational therapists of their indispensable role in mental health, particularly in their focus on occupations and the provision of holistic care. Proactive advocacies are proposed to further advance the integration of OT into the mental health system, emphasizing the imperative of raising awareness, fostering collaboration, and spearheading innovative trends in mental health care. Recommendations include incorporating mental health education into academic curricula, meticulously documenting the effectiveness of interventions, and advocating for policies that unequivocally support occupational therapy in mental health initiatives. Strategic areas for political and legal advocacy encompass fortifying the groundwork for OT practice in mental health, lobbying for increased government positions for occupational therapists, and amplifying awareness through impactful campaigns and collaborative initiatives.

In summary, the seamless integration of occupational therapy into the mental health system in the Philippines demands concerted efforts to enhance awareness, advocate for policy reforms, underscore the significance of occupations in mental health, and foster robust collaborations among various stakeholders. This collaborative approach is essential to ensure comprehensive and inclusive mental health care for all.

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