

Creating a new research agenda for occupational therapists

What are the most important research questions for occupational therapists? **Jenny Mac Donnell** is set to find out

RCOT has embarked on a major new research project to define the occupational therapy profession's research priorities. What are the big questions that occupational therapists, service users and carers in the UK want answered?

RCOT's research priorities were most recently defined in 2007 in *Building the evidence for occupational therapy: Priorities for research*. As the RCOT's research and development review moves towards drafting the new research and development strategy, the time is now right to establish the UK occupational therapy profession's research priorities for the future.



What is the role and effectiveness of assistive technology (AT) (e.g. augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, ICT-based communication aids, assistive technology, PDA/Net/2nd hand/tablet/phone) as a focus and how can they best be accessed by children and young people with learning difficulties?

The research priorities will be established through a collaborative project between occupational therapists, service users and carers. There will be many opportunities for you to get involved as a member of the steering group, a project partner or responding to the survey questionnaire.

Your input is vital to help shape the future direction of occupational therapy research in the UK.

The newly-appointed project lead Jenny Mac Donnell says: 'I am looking forward to working on this important project with members of the Royal College of Occupational Therapists, service users and carers, and to identifying the most important questions in need of an answer.'

'It's unusual to work on a project where the outcome is a series of questions rather than answers, but it's a great opportunity to set the future agenda for occupational therapy research.'

A collaborative project

In order to deliver this project fairly, enabling equal input from professional and lay participants, a robust method is required. This is one of the reasons that the RCOT has decided to work with the James Lind Alliance (JLA) on this important project.

JLA is a non-profit initiative, set up in 2004, and its infrastructure is supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). It has facilitated approximately 100 Priority Setting Partnerships (PSP), enabling patients, carers and clinicians to work together to identify and prioritise the questions that they most want research to answer.

JLA PSPs have traditionally focused on specific health conditions such as dementia, prostate cancer, bipolar or cystic fibrosis. In recent years, PSPs have started to address broader healthcare topics, such as physiotherapy, adult social work and palliative care.

More information on the PSPs is available at: www.jla.nihr.ac.uk.

The project will result in the publication of a contemporary 'Top 10' list of research priorities for the occupational therapy profession in the UK, which will define its future research agenda.

What are the benefits of working with the JLA?

Partnering with the JLA offers a number of benefits; it has a well-established, respected and robust methodology, which has been successful in a range of settings.

It will provide us with the basis to try to ensure that health research funders are aware of the issues that matter most to occupational therapists, service users and carers.

Underpinning their tried and tested approach to priority setting, JLA has a clear set of principles and a framework which will benefit the project. They include:

- a transparent process;
- balanced inclusion of occupational therapists, service users and carers;
- exclusion of non-practitioner researchers from voting on the priorities because they have other opportunities to influence the research priorities of funders; and
- exclusion of groups or organisations that have significant competing interests, for example, pharmaceutical companies.

The balanced and inclusive nature of the methodology and the nationally recognised approach to identifying research priorities, which can influence the funding plans of major grant awarding bodies, were important factors in our decision to partner with JLA.

We will be led through the process by JLA senior adviser, Katherine Cowan, who will bring an objective view to the project and will support it with her finely honed facilitation and chairing skills.

'I'm really looking forward to working with the Occupational Therapy PSP,' Katherine says. 'My role is to be a neutral facilitator of this process, working closely with the coordinating team at RCOT and the PSP steering group to ensure that the JLA method is followed and that its principles are upheld.'

'It's a great opportunity to engage with occupational therapists and the people that they treat, in order to understand what they want research to deliver.'

Dr Jo Watson, RCOT assistant director – education and research, comments: 'I am delighted to be working with the James Lind Alliance in a Priority Setting Partnership to identify the research questions that occupational therapists, the users of our services and their carers really want answered to further enhance the quality and outcomes of the services we provide.'

'I believe that this methodology is robust and will help us to lay strong foundations on which to build the evidence base for occupational therapy in and beyond the UK.'

How does a PSP work?

The JLA PSP methodology operates as a seven-stage process. First, we will establish a steering group with representation from occupational therapists, service users and carers. If you would like to be considered to become a member of the steering group then please complete the expression of interest at: www.rcot.co.uk/otpsp.

The second stage is to use a survey to gather the uncertainties/unanswered questions. Your input through completing the survey devised by the steering group and distributing it to your networks will be crucial to the success of the project.

Stages three and four involve processing the survey responses and refining the list of uncertainties/unanswered questions that it generates. Any questions that have already been answered by research are removed from the list of summary questions.

Stage five, the interim priority setting stage, begins with a shortlisting survey. The objective is to generate a shorter list of questions that will be subject to robust discussion and debate, and prioritised at a final workshop attended by occupational therapists, service users and carers.

Stage six is the final priority setting workshop, during which the highest ranked questions from the interim priority setting survey are discussed. Occupational therapists, service users and carers will be guided through a nominal group technique to agree the final list of the 'Top 10' priorities.

Finally, RCOT will publish the 'Top 10' list of research priorities and promote them to researchers and funders.

Many of the issues raised will go on to be developed into funded research projects. For example, the Palliative and End of Life Care

PSP published its 'Top 10' in January 2015; four priorities and a number of questions from the long list have resulted in research projects funded by Marie Curie and the Motor Neurone Disease Association.

In addition to promoting them to funding bodies such as the NIHR, it is RCOT's intention that the 'Top 10' research priorities for occupational therapy in the UK will be linked to future funding calls for the UK Occupational Therapy Research Foundation (UKOTRF).

Full details on the process are available at: www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/about-the-james-lind-alliance/downloads/JLA-PSP-process-final.pdf.

Join the steering group

The project requires a steering group of approximately 12 to 15 people who are happy to participate in monthly meetings. These will mainly be via teleconference, with the likelihood of up to three being in person. Membership of the group will be spread across service users, carers and occupational therapists working in a variety of settings, and represents a wonderful opportunity to make a valuable contribution to your profession in addition to offering a rich continuing professional development experience.

Reasonable expenses will be covered by the project budget and occupational therapist members of the steering group will have the opportunity to engage with service users and carers in a unique setting to find out what's really important to them.

Steering group members from other PSPs have reported positive experiences valuing the opportunity to really listen and learn from the experiences of the clinician, service user and carer.

A member of the Type 2 Diabetes Steering Group, Dr Sarah Finer, senior lecturer and honorary consultant, Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London and Barts Health NHS Trust said: 'Being part of the steering group for the T2D PSP was a fantastic experience.

'As an academic working in T2D, I really believe in the power that research has to improve health, but as a clinician, I'm also very aware that research doesn't always reach the areas of greatest

importance to people living with, or at risk of the condition.

'So this PSP was a great opportunity to try and address this mismatch, and put focus on the research questions that really matter.'

Find out more about the experiences of the members of the Type 2 Diabetes Steering Group at: www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/news/type-2-diabetes-psp-reflections-from-steering-group-members/7261.

Become a partner

If your organisation or group is interested in supporting and learning more about the project, but does not have the time or resources to join the steering group, then perhaps you would like to become a PSP partner?

Project partners will be key to promoting the project, promoting participation in the surveys and workshops through their networks and contacts.

Input from a wide network of interested occupational therapists, service users and carers will be important to ensuring the outcomes truly reflect the challenges facing occupational therapy in the UK.

This is a collaborative project and engagement with a wide range of audiences is important to making it a success.

What next?

If you would like to be considered for membership of the steering group then complete the expression of interest form at www.rcot.co.uk/otpsp and return to Ruth Unstead-Joss (ruth.unstead-joss@rcot.co.uk) by 15 March 2019.

Jenny Mac Donnell, RCOT project lead, email: Jenny.MacDonnell@rcot.co.uk. For more information please visit: www.rcot.co.uk/otpsp and follow us on Twitter where we will be posting regular updates using #RCOT_PSP

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Additional information

PSP project: www.rcot.co.uk/otpsp

JLA: www.jla.nihr.ac.uk

JLA PSP process map: www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/about-the-james-lind-alliance/downloads/JLA-PSP-process-final.pdf

Reflections from Steering Group members: www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/news/type-2-diabetes-psp-reflections-from-steering-group-members/7261