

History of the Occupational Therapy profession in the Maltese Islands

Introduction

The Occupational Therapy profession in the Maltese Islands is relatively a new concept in the health care profession. In-fact it is only after World War II that Occupational Therapy started to be introduced in the main physical and mental hospitals. Being a republic country since 1974, Malta has developed its roots from the United Kingdom. The first Occupational Therapists were recruited from Britain. In 1974, two Maltese Occupational Therapists were graduated in the UK until further development of the profession led to the opening of local courses.

The first time occupational was mentioned in mental health was way back in 1838 by Dr. Thomas Chetcuti. Working in a mental Asylum he claimed that agricultural work, gardening, domestic and other similar jobs resulted in relief, mental stimulation and a normalizing influence. Dr. Chetcuti, who is regarded as the father of the Maltese Psychiatry, in 1853, introduced a gym to the inmates with the aim to prevent physical decline.

The value of occupation as a form of treatment came in January 1851 (Cassar P., op. cit., p19). In August 1853 members of the Special Board of the Asylum agreed that the “good result of giving occupation to the inmates was manifested” (Minutes, Board of the Commissioners of Charity, 25/9/1853, Mouth Carmel Archives).

Between 1861 and 1928 all inmates at the Lunatic asylum (mental hospital) had to be employed. Females used to carry out weaving, crochet, lace making and needlework, while males had to carry out heavy work including weaving, rushwork, gardening and animal rearing. Most of the workshops were situated away from the wards to provide a change of environment.

The first time Occupation Therapy was referred in a professional manner was in February 1926. During a visit to the hospital, the Island’s Governor complained about the lack of indoor occupations for the patients. He said, “as regards what is know as Occupational Therapy, we are still far from having a full organized department, and cited examples abroad where such therapy was being introduced (letter issued, 19/2/1926).”

In 1932, Dr. Vassallo - Superintendent of Mental Diseases stressed the great need for engagement of an “Occupation Officer” (Report of the Comptroller of Charitable Institutions for 1932-33,p.147). He said that OT had received a great impetus in the treatment of mental disorders and had to be introduced on a professional basis. He added, “until such people were appointed, no improvement in this line could be expected (Health Report for 1937, p. xxxvi). Further more, he stressed that anything “which occupied the minds of the patients not only lessened the risk of friction, but in many cases it had a define therapeutic value”.

During War years (1939-1944) everything stopped. In 1950s the treatment in mental illness underwent a major change. Vast reforms in mental hospitals followed the introduction of new drugs, opening of new wards, increase emphases in rehabilitation and the re-introduction of Occupational Therapy centres. In the early 1960s World Health Organisation (WHO) experts arrived in Malta to assess mental health care system. In their conclusion and recommendations they stressed the necessity to expand in occupational and industrial therapy, as well as the need to have trained staff to carry out these developments (Barton R., Report on a visit to Malta, pp. 52-53).

Meanwhile, the main general hospital was officially opened in the 1940. While in the early 1950s, OT had become fairly established as a paramedical profession in many developed and developing countries, health care in the Maltese Islands was still lacking. Local authorities recognized the fact that OT was useful and essential to certain patients (Minutes, Fol. 860/55, Medical and Health Department Archives). In 1955, the Ministry of Health decided to recruit OT. Since no Maltese had the required qualifications, the Crown Agents for Overseas Development and Administration was contacted and in 1956 two female OT's from the UK started to work at St. Luke's Hospital (SLH). With the increase in the number of patients attending the OT department, the place was getting very crowded. A plan was submitted to further increase the size of the department, which would allow more space for further OT treatment areas. However, with the departure of the expatriate OTs and no qualified replacements to take over, the OT department was closed in 1969.

In 1965 an Occupational Therapist arrived in Mount Carmel Hospital (MCH), previously know as Lunatic Asylum, with the aim to setup an OT department. However, the most important gain was the official appreciation of what occupation could do to make hospital life more purposeful for the patients (Wylie A., WHO report on a Visit to Malta, 1966, p.2). However, everything was shelved when the adviser left the island. In 1968 a part-time Occupational Therapist was appointed at MCH and she reopened the unit setup by the WHO adviser. When she resigned (2 years later) everything was shelved again. A technician took over in 1970 but no significant structure could be established. Several articles in the press (Times of Malta, 10/3/1971) mentioned the need to have OT services at MCH.

In Gozo at the Chambrai Psychiatric Hospital, which was opened in 1934, patients were engaged in several activities. These activities continued to be encouraged over the years by the introduction of new ones. An OT unit was setup after a report by the Friends of Chambrai in 1975 (OT report, April 1976 MCH). In 1980 an English OT was recruited to setup an OT department at Craig Hospital. The services included that of assessment, training in ADL's, hand rehabilitation, home Visits and provision of aids. Contacts with day centres and volunteer associations were established.

The first Maltese Occupational Therapists

The first two Maltese OTs were appointed in 1974 following a four-year course in the UK. One of the OT went to MCH to re-setup the OT unit again. He introduced new work activities including industrial work, woodwork, printing, sewing, gardening and clerical

work. ADL's re-training was part of the treatment program. In 1975, technical staffs were engaged to improve the OT service. The other OT re-opened an OT department at the main general hospital temporary until a new department was inaugurated in January 1976.

In 1977, 5 local candidates graduated in England and were qualified in 1982. Here the OT services started to spread further. One of the OT's setup a department at St. Vincent De Paul residence, which is a long-stay residential home for the elderly. Here craft, woodwork, cane-work, crochet, knitting, macramé and weaving sessions were introduced. Group therapy sessions were also carried out on the wards. ADL re-training also feature in the treatment program.

In 1984 and 1985 saw the first two occupational therapy courses which by that time were organized by St. Luke's Training School (later changed into the Institute of Health Care). In 1984 the OT profession was officially recognized as a paramedical health care profession.

In 1985 the Malta Association of Occupational Therapists (MAOT) was formed with the aim to promote the profession in the Maltese Islands. A major step forward came in 1994 when the MAOT became a full member of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT).

6 other OT courses were opened between 1988 – 1994. The first-degree course was opened in 1999 followed by another one in 2001. At present there are 35 OT students.

The Occupational Therapy services in the Maltese Islands are provided at :-

St. Luke's Hospital: Being the main general hospital in Malta, it caters for all ages and conditions. The following services/ wards can be found including an emergency unit, intensive therapy unit, surgical and medical wards, orthopaedic wards, neurosurgery ward, paediatric wards, anti – natal and post – natal wards, gyneacology ward, psychiatric unit. There is a general theatre and also specific theatres such as the orthopaedic theatre. Out – patient clinics are also found in the grounds of this hospital.

Mount Carmel Hospital: This mental institution and rehabilitation unit consists of an acute admission ward, rehabilitation wards and long-term wards. Also a half way house and a young peoples unit.

St. Vincent de Paule Residence: This is a long stay residential home mainly occupied by elderly people but there are also middle - aged disabled persons. Many of the old wards are being reconstructed.

Qormi Day Centre: This center was started as a pilot project in which an occupational therapy service is provided for mentally disabled persons coming from three particular villages to maintain them in the community after discharge from the mental hospital.

Boffa Hospital: This is an oncology hospital, but it also caters for infectious diseases, spinal unit and a dermatology outpatient's clinic.

Zammit Clapp Hospital: This is a sub - acute medical and rehabilitation hospital for the elderly. Its main aim is to resettle the older person back into the community after discharge. It has three inpatient wards and also has an out – patient / day hospital service.

Gozo General Hospital: This hospital caters for all general conditions. It offers basically the same services as St. Luke's hospital but on a smaller scale. Ta' L-Ibragg Hospital is a mental hospital situated near the general hospital but is a separate building. Here one finds short-stay ward, long-stay ward and the out patients department.

Conclusion

As we saw in the beginning of this article, the importance of occupation as being part of a treatment program regime was felt many years ago. In the Maltese Islands the development of occupational therapy as a profession developed with a slow pace. Pioneer OTs were appointed from the UK until two local therapists graduated abroad in 1974. When they returned back, new departments were opened and the importance to have more OTs was felt. Local courses were opened in mid-80s on a diploma level until the first-degree course was opened in 1999. At present, the OT services are offered in the main general hospital, mental hospital, long-stay residential care, Boffa hospital, Zammit Clapp Hospital, and Gozo general and mental hospital. At present, OT services are very much hospital based. Community OT is provided at Qormi day centre and in some government elderly homes. One of our future goals as OT's is to expand more in the community. This can only be done through an increase in the number of practicing Occupational Therapists. Increases in the continuing education opportunities, to enhance the Occupational Therapy hierarchy and to increase OT salary are also our future aims.

Demis Cachia – OTR, Dip. Ger
Senior OT - Malta

