

AOTA Fact Sheet: Continuing Competence in the Occupational Therapy Profession

The 2006 Representative Assembly (RA) adopted Charge 272 which charged the president to develop educational materials clarifying legal practice requirements, professional credentialing and certification programs. The rationale for the motion stated “in the review of the constituent feedback regarding continuing competence it became evident [that] many members do not understand the role delineation of AOTA, NBCOT and state licensure boards.” This fact sheet outlines the important role that each of these entities has in promoting continuing competence for occupational therapy practitioners.

American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) is the nationally recognized professional association of approximately 35,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and students of occupational therapy. The mission of AOTA is to advance the quality, availability, use, and support of occupational therapy through standard setting, advocacy, education, and research on behalf of its members and the public.

One of the primary objectives of AOTA is to promote high professional standards and the continuing competence of occupational therapy practitioners throughout their careers. As a professional association, AOTA’s has a number of roles in promoting continuing competence in the occupational therapy profession, including:

- Development of professional standards
- Providing members with professional development tools
- Providing quality continuing education
- Promoting state licensure, including continuing competence requirements
- Development of model continuing competence guidelines as a resource for state regulatory boards

Professional Standards

The 2002 RA passed a motion to establish the Commission on Continuing Competence and Professional Development (CCCPD), which was then ratified when the membership passed the 2002 Bylaws amendments. CCCPD has served AOTA by recommending standards for continuing competence and developing strategies for communicating information to stakeholders about issues of continuing competence and competency affecting occupational therapy. The CCCPD also develops tools to assist members in the development and implementation of continuing competence plans.

AOTA’s *Standards for Continuing Competence* defines continuing competence as a process involving the examination of current competence and the development of capacity for the future. It is a component of ongoing professional development and lifelong learning. Continuing competence is a dynamic, multidimensional process in which the occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant develop and maintain

the knowledge, performance skills, interpersonal abilities, critical reasoning, and ethical reasoning skills necessary to perform current and future roles and responsibilities within the profession.

AOTA's *Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics* (2005) also guides practitioners to maintain high standards of competence:

Principle 4. Occupational therapy personnel shall achieve and continually maintain high standards of competence. (DUTY).

Occupational therapy personnel shall:

C. Take responsibility for maintaining and documenting competence in practice, education, and research by participating in professional development and educational activities.

D. Be competent in all topic areas in which they provide instruction to consumers, peers, and/or students.

E. Critically examine available evidence so they may perform their duties on the basis of current information.

Board Certification and Specialty Certification

AOTA has developed Board Certifications in Gerontology, Mental Health, Pediatrics, and Physical Rehabilitation and Specialty Certifications in Driving and Community Mobility; Environmental Modification; Feeding, Eating, and Swallowing; and Low Vision. These certifications serve as a framework for professional development that is specifically geared to occupational therapy. The programs are voluntary and are intended to assist practitioners to continually build their capacity for meeting identified competencies.

Providing Quality Continuing Education

AOTA offers its members quality continuing education opportunities through Annual Conference, Workshops, Self-Paced Clinical Courses, Online Courses, and Continuing Education Articles. AOTA has also developed the AOTA Approved Provider Program to promote the quality and integrity of continuing education activities offered to occupational therapy practitioners by various providers and to assist in the identification of those activities that are relevant to the foundation and/or practice of occupational therapy.

Professional Development Tool

AOTA has developed the Professional Development Tool (PDT) to help occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants identify areas of knowledge, training, or experience in which they might seek new knowledge or improvement or in which they may seek to expand their work.

The PDT offers ways for occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants to self-assess their capacity for future roles and job responsibilities as well as strategies for creating a plan for learning that will lead to continuing competence or excellence in future practice.

Promoting State Licensure

For nearly 30 years, AOTA has fostered state regulation of the profession as the principal means of protecting the public through a framework of legal standards that occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants must meet in order to practice. AOTA's licensure policy (Policy 5.3) supports licensure of qualified occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants in order to protect consumers from services by unqualified practitioners. AOTA supports state occupational therapy laws that include minimum continuing competence requirements for licensure renewal. AOTA's licensure policy also states that the Association supports the enforcement role of state boards in assuring the ongoing qualifications of occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants and recognizing multiple methods and pathways for occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants to demonstrate their continuing competence.

Model Continuing Competence Guidelines

As the standard setting body for the profession, AOTA has the responsibility to articulate how its professional standards should be interpreted. AOTA's *Model Continuing Competence Guidelines for Occupational Therapists and Occupational Therapy Assistants: A Resource for State Regulatory Boards* provides a framework that regulators can use to address the challenge of assuring the continuing competence of occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants.

State Regulatory Boards

State Regulatory Boards are public bodies created by state legislatures to ensure the health and safety of the citizens of that state. Their responsibility is to protect the public from potential harm caused by incompetent or unqualified practitioners. State Regulatory Boards have the legal authority to determine whether occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants have the necessary requirements to practice in a given legal jurisdiction. Typically, the requirements to initially obtain a state license or certification include evidence of passing the NBCOT certification examination, a diploma from an accredited occupational therapy educational program, completion of the required fieldwork, and payment of a state fee.

Most jurisdictions require the state license or certification to be renewed annually or biennially. The renewal process in 41 states also includes submission of evidence showing that the applicant has participated in continuing education or in other types of professional development activities. State regulators mandate continuing competence requirements in an attempt to ensure that practitioners who are licensed or certified in their state maintain competence.

The number of contact hours for state licensure renewal varies, with most states requiring approximately 20-30 continuing education credits or contact hours biennially. States also vary in the kinds of continuing competence activities they allow. Options may include: publishing of books, articles, chapters, film, or video; presentations including workshops, seminars, and in-service training; self-study including article review; research grants; working as a research assistant or teaching assistant; fieldwork supervision; mentoring; original design of new OT equipment (presented or published); professional meetings and

activities; specialty certification; graduate or undergraduate coursework; and holding state or national office in a professional organization.

Some regulatory boards limit acceptable continuing competence activities to those activities directly related to clinical practice. Others recognize the importance of an individual maintaining competence in the varied roles and responsibilities related to occupational therapy throughout his or her career and the important ways that these roles directly and indirectly affect competent practice.

Detailed information about state continuing competence requirements is available in the Licensure section of AOTA's Web site at <http://www.aota.org>.

National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT)

The National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy, Inc. (NBCOT) is a private, not-for-profit credentialing organization that provides certification for the occupational therapy profession. NBCOT serves the public interest by developing, administering and continually reviewing a certification process that reflects current standards of competent practice in occupational therapy.

The mission of NBCOT is to serve the public interest through the certification of occupational therapy practitioners.

NBCOT oversees and administers the entry-level certification examination for occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants. This examination is what the state regulatory boards use as one of the criteria for licensure (or other forms of regulation). NBCOT uses the examination as one of the criteria for initial NBCOT certification.

NBCOT certifies eligible individuals as Occupational Therapist Registered OTR® (OTR) or Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant COTA® (COTA). The OTR and COTA credentials are registered certification marks owned by NBCOT. Certification by NBCOT indicates to the public that the OTR or the COTA has met all of NBCOT's educational, fieldwork, and examination requirements. Maintaining NBCOT certification entitles individuals to the continued use of NBCOT's registered certification marks OTR or COTA. Individuals who choose not to renew this certification are required by NBCOT to no longer use its certification marks.

According to NBCOT's 2006 Certification Renewal Handbook, the following requirements must be met to renew certification as an OTR or COTA:

- Completed application
- Certification Renewal fee
- Completion of 36 Professional Development Units (PDUs) within the three years prior to renewal date, if the certificant is on the 3-year renewal cycle. A minimum of 18 of the 36 Professional Development Units must be directly related to occupational therapy.
- Reading, understanding, and agreeing to abide by the NBCOT Certificant Attestation Statement.

NBCOT states on its Web site that:

“The Certification Renewal Program complements state licensure.” NBCOT reports that “there are no uniform licensure or continuing competence requirements among the states. While 40 jurisdictions request a defined number of continuing education units or contact hours, the remaining jurisdictions have virtually no requirements beyond completing an application and paying a fee to that jurisdiction or regulatory entity.

The NBCOT® certification process is a national model that states are encouraged to embrace. Following successful completion of the initial certification examination, ongoing professional development is required every three years. This national certification standard supplements state regulatory requirements. Serving the public's interest is made stronger as a result.”

States or jurisdictions commonly require occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants to be initially certified (i.e., pass the NBCOT entry-level certification exam) before they can qualify for a license. Most states or jurisdictions, however, do not require practitioners to renew this certification to maintain their licenses to practice.