

INTEGRATING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY INTO PRIMARY HEALTH CARE: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PREVENTIVE AND REHABILITATION SERVICES IN MALAYSIA

Harnisha HAIDHIR
Vice President of Malaysian Occupational Therapists Association

Abstract

Malaysia is facing significant healthcare challenges driven by the rapid rise of non-communicable diseases, population ageing, mental health concerns, and increasing healthcare costs. These issues have highlighted the urgent need to strengthen primary health care (PHC) systems that emphasize prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation, and community-based care. Within this evolving healthcare landscape, occupational therapy (OT) plays an increasingly important role in promoting functional independence, participation, and quality of life across the lifespan. This presentation explores the current and emerging role of occupational therapy within Malaysia's primary health care system and its contribution toward achieving a more accessible, person-centred, and sustainable healthcare model.

The presentation highlights how occupational therapists in Malaysia are expanding services beyond hospital settings into communities, homes, schools, Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR/PDK) centres, health clinics, and public outreach programmes. Guided by a life-course and wellness-oriented approach, occupational therapy interventions address health promotion, disease prevention, rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and palliative care. The scope of practice spans multiple domains including activities of daily living, health management, education, work participation, leisure, social participation, and cognitive functioning.

Particular emphasis is given to the integration of occupational therapy into national health priorities, including healthy ageing, mental health, diabetes management, smoking cessation, paediatric developmental screening, and community rehabilitation. The presentation also discusses the implementation of the World Health Organization's Integrated Care for Older People (ICOPE) framework, where occupational therapists contribute significantly to maintaining functional ability, cognitive health, and independent living among older adults. In addition, emerging initiatives such as domiciliary care, targeted community screening, and interdisciplinary collaboration are presented as strategic directions for future practice.

This presentation demonstrates that occupational therapy is no longer confined to institutional rehabilitation but has become a critical component of primary health care delivery in Malaysia. Strengthening occupational therapy services within PHC can support preventive healthcare strategies, reduce hospital dependency, empower communities, and enhance population health outcomes. The future of occupational therapy in Malaysia lies in integrated, community-focused, and occupation-based services that respond dynamically to the nation's changing demographic and healthcare needs.