

H1N1 PANDEMIC

With the H1N1 Pandemic upon us, the College has been receiving questions from members and employers regarding the role of occupational therapists as well as the role of the College during an infectious disease outbreak. The following was adapted from the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario (COTO) Position Statement on Influenza Pandemic and Registrant Pandemic Planning Kit available on the COTO website at www.coto.org as well as the College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia (CRNNS) Emergency Preparedness Plan available on their website at www.crnns.ca.

Role of Occupational Therapists

Occupational therapists have a professional obligation as well as the legal requirement to provide clients with safe, competent and ethical care. This professional obligation extends to a public health emergency such as a pandemic.

It is important to recognize that as health professionals, occupational therapists have a role to play in contributing to a health emergency such as a pandemic. The College recognizes that occupational therapists possess a number of skills which can contribute to the execution of local pandemic plans. In an emergency, there may be a need for health care professionals to be reallocated from their usual roles and settings. It is the position of the College that occupational therapists should consider the following key issues in relation to their professional roles and responsibilities.

- To become and remain informed regarding the provincial and local pandemic plans, particularly regarding the role of occupational therapy and to ensure that current and relevant information is available for ongoing decision making.
- To maintain and make available resources appropriate to the practice setting and provider role, for purposes of personal and public safety, as well as to participate in the implementation of any safety precautions, such as infection prevention and control.
- To consider personal competencies relevant to the provision of care during a pandemic and develop a plan for decision making and involvement.
- To make decisions regarding provision of care based on consideration of a profession specific Code of Ethics or within an ethical framework.
- To work within the legislative structure of the Occupational Therapy Act when considering new roles and responsibilities.
- To comply with government directives announced pre, during and post pandemic.

The SARS epidemic in Ontario demonstrated that decisions during pandemics were made not only based on clinical and epidemiological issues but also on important human values. Following this epidemic, an ethical framework was developed in response to the experiences of healthcare providers. This framework developed by the University of

Toronto Joint centre for Bioethics reported by Peter A Singer, Solomon R Benatar, Mark Bernstein, et al (BMJ 2003;327:1342-1344) provides guidelines to identify and resolve possible ethical issues in a pandemic. It is available at www.jointcentreforbioethics.ca/people/documetns/upshur_stand_guard.pdf.

The ethical framework is not intended to be a total guide to ethics for an emergency/disaster. In the actual situation, occupational therapists will need to use their judgement, consult their professional Codes of Ethics and consult additional resources such as the College, employers, colleagues, educators and others with expertise in ethics.

Role of the College

During a pandemic the role of the College is:

1. To ensure effective communication with registrants – The overall goal of communication during a pandemic will be to maintain the role of the College as an organization committed to public protection and the advancement of safe, competent and ethical occupational therapy practice. Meeting this goal will require an emphasis on providing occupational therapists with resources specific to the pandemic and developing collaborative partnerships to ensure that the College has links to relevant information and decision making.

2. To provide advice on regulatory issues and standards of practice – The ability to provide professional practice consultation is an essential role of the College which will continue during a pandemic. It is essential that the College support occupational therapists while maintaining protection of the public.

3. Maintain a mechanism to register qualified professionals and to conduct other business as required to address regulatory issues.

How do I prepare?

It is important that you take time to educate yourself on this topic. Occupational therapists should review materials such as provincial and local pandemic planning; ensure good infection control practices are established and maintained; prepare a list of resources available; ensure they are familiar with their profession's specific code of ethics and other ethical frameworks and complete a self-assessment of your skills and competencies that may be needed during a pandemic.

Occupational therapists should take proactive steps now to develop a plan and ensure that resources are in place for themselves and their families.