Connected in diversity; positioned for impact

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At the WFOT Congress held in Cape Town in May 2018, great interest was generated by a debate on the motion: This house believes it is time to reconsider framing our work as therapy. At the beginning of a formal debate, the audience are invited to vote for or against the motion. The two teams then have equal time to make their points, followed by time for the audience to have their say. At the end of the process, the audience votes again to find out if either of the teams has managed to sway opinion. Many of the 240-member audience definitely had something to say, and their comments were diverse.

Mike Jarrey, WFOT Delegate from Belgium commented on the many roles he takes, punctuating his list with ‘…and I am an OT’.

I am an OT educator, and I am an OT.
I am an OT researcher and I am an OT.
I am an occupational scientist and I am an OT.

Ladies and gentlemen, I put it to you that, in this wonderfully diverse profession of ours, you can be all of these things but, at the end of the day, I AM AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST.

The last audience speaker at the debate was a 4th year student at the University of the Witswatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, Subisiso Mayo. He silenced everyone with his eloquent words.

Jacks of all trades?
We will never become this
As we have always been and continue to be the Jack of the trade.
We have and will continue to empower those we meet and affect with our expertise;
We create more than therapy and shall not be bound by this title.
We have seen the hands of our profession reach each and every level of society, a society that is shaped by those who engage in it.
In our country I have seen first-hand how dynamic our scope can range, and I believe we can move further than this.
We are more than therapy or the cure or coping mechanism to a diagnosis:
I have been given the opportunity to learn, to be taught, as well as practice the pervasive nature of our profession.

There was a mention of language
And we speak the language of the people.
We should never fear change
And I believe the name ‘therapy’ has chained the minds as well the potential of the students looking to make change and grow our collective expertise.

Perhaps this brings us to how we define occupational therapy. How do we expand the definition to encompass the breadth of what we do? How can we draw on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the two-way influence of global policy and the effects of global communications? How shall we respond to Subisiso’s words while keeping in mind the words of Mike?

Many other issues were discussed and debated during the rest of Congress, though perhaps not so formally, providing a platform for us all to share our understandings and gain new ones.

Elelwani Ramugondo stirred our thinking with her keynote speech on Healing Work: Intersections of Decoloniality. She gave examples of where action can be taken through ‘meaningful collaborations, or maximized on existing connections with other professions or disciplines, social movements and civil society, in order to advance decoloniality (healing work)’ (Ramugondo, 2018).

Karen Walley Hammell, in her keynote speech on, Building globally relevant occupational therapy from the strength of our diversity, drew attention to the point that ‘knowledge derived from our profession’s diverse perspectives might be triangulated to generate inclusive theoretical models, inform culturally-safe practices and be more responsive to the structural factors that inequitably constrain people’s opportunities to use their abilities’ (Hammell, 2018).

The third keynote slot, Impact of Occupational Therapy: Voices from the field, provided an opportunity for five service users to present their perspectives on their own experience of occupational therapy. Through moving presentations, each of them shared their journey with an appreciative audience.

There were many presentations and workshops on working with marginalised or displaced persons. The number indicates to importance of the topic in our current global landscape. In this issue of the Bulletin, authors explore the role of occupational therapists in working with immigrants, displaced persons and refugees. Worldwide, we are dealing with diverse views on immigration both personally and as societies.
Writing in *Time* magazine, David Runciman (2018) offered an interesting view on the attitudes of older people toward immigrants in receiving countries where they may once have been immigrants themselves. While these communities may rail against immigrants, they also need them to keep their countries’ economies afloat because their own younger generations are emigrating to escape the pressure of living in a work-oriented society. It is these younger people who seem more willing to adapt and are generally more comfortable with multicultural communities. Lasting solutions and durable values are needed, Runciman notes, to break down these generational divisions. Where are occupational therapists in all this?

As we raise awareness of the desperate needs of marginalised and displaced persons around the world, occupational therapists are working to support them in a variety of ways, as shown in this issue.

**References**


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