The Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland

Submission to:
Department of Health Consultation on
Your Health is Your Wealth: a Policy Framework for a Healthier Ireland 2012 – 2020

September 2011
Introduction

The Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI) is the professional body for occupational therapists in the Republic of Ireland. The AOTI has been in existence for over forty years to promote the highest standards of education and practice in Occupational Therapy, to advocate for its members and service users, and to positively influence and contribute to healthcare systems and policy in Ireland.

The AOTI welcomes the opportunity to make a submission as part of the consultation on the development of a high-level Public Health Policy in Ireland, to cover the period from 2012 to 2020. The AOTI also welcomes the Government’s commitment with regard to the health and wellbeing of the whole population and its vision for a healthier population that is protected from public health threats, living in a healthier and more sustainable environment, with increased social and economic productivity and greater social inclusion.

An Occupational Therapy Perspective on Public Health

The AOTI believes that the Occupational Therapy profession has a very valuable contribution to make to the achievement of the aims of the new Public Health Policy. Occupational therapists are experts in lifestyle redesign and helping people to live healthier, more balanced lives.

In occupational therapy, occupations refer to the everyday activities that people do as individuals, in families and in communities to occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life. Occupations include things people want to do, need to do and are expected to do (WFOT, 2006). Occupational therapists have an in-depth understanding of occupation as a determinant of health and how patterns of occupation (our lifestyle) can help and hinder our health and well-being.

An occupational therapists approach to changing health-related behaviours is based on an analysis of individual, lifestyle and environmental factors and understanding how these interact to determine a person’s health and well-being. With this understanding, occupational therapists can effectively engage individuals and groups in lifestyle redesign to achieve better health outcomes and improved quality of life.

Lifestyle redesign is an innovative occupational therapy treatment approach, based upon principles from medical and health research, which has been shown to improve health and wellness by preventing and managing chronic conditions by building healthier lifestyles. This is achieved by focusing on the acquisition of health-promoting habits and routines in people’s daily lives (USC, 2011). The success of this transformative process of enhancing health and wellness, is strengthened by the fact that intervention occurs within the contexts of people’s everyday lives.
The AOTI believe that the unique perspective of the Occupational Therapy profession is a valuable resource for the development and implementation of the Public Health Policy and ultimately for achieving ambitious change in the health-related behaviour of the Irish population.

Comments on the Document ‘Proceedings of the Public Health Policy Consultation, June 2011’

The AOTI support the principles that arose from the public consultation meetings, i.e. that the Public Health Policy document should be:

- Aspirational and inspirational
- Achievable and realistic
- Implementable and transparent
- Underpinned by a strong commitment to health equity
- Multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral
- Cognisant of the need for strong leadership

The AOTI also support the key paradigms to underpin the strategy as outlined in the consultation document, i.e.

- The use of the WHO definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”
- The policy must emphasise that health is socially and economically determined and seek to create a wide understanding that this is the case
- Health needs to be embedded across all sectors
- Health must be seen as a right. The policy should take a rights based approach
- The policy should be built on principles of fairness and equity
- Equality of access, participation and outcome should be guiding principles
- Community empowerment is an integral part of the process
- A healthy Ireland is a fair and strong Ireland
- Health is everyone’s business; from the individual through to government level
- Prevention is better than cure – both for the individual and the exchequer
- Unequal societies are unhealthy for everyone

The AOTI strongly supports the actions highlighted in the ‘across the life course’ section of the Consultation document, as follows:

- Quality of life for all should be at the core of addressing actions across the life course
- In focusing on older people, the aim should be to increase the disability free years, rather than life expectancy only
- Children were particularly highlighted by stakeholders as a priority; fully funded early childhood interventions were a desired action as well as better education and higher literacy levels more generally. A regional consultation particularly wished to emphasise not only the child, but also the family context in which that child is residing as key for intervention strategies
• Education should prioritise mental and physical well-being to a greater extent
• The following areas of health were particularly highlighted during regional consultations – occupational health, young mother’s health, Traveller health, with a particular emphasis on mental health
• The policy should aim to deal with secondary and tertiary preventative health strategies or ill-health, and health inequalities experienced by people who may already have health issues, for example people with disabilities

General Comments on Your Health is Your Wealth: a Policy Framework for a Healthier Ireland 2012-2020 – Short Introduction

Mental health occupational therapists work with people with eating disorders including obesity. But from a public health perspective, obesity cannot be viewed as a mental health problem per se. The western sedentary lifestyle is a major contributory factor in the rising rates of obesity. The consequences are enormous and include personal suffering through disease and disability as well as increased medical care and its associated costs. While personal responsibility and healthy lifestyle choices are part of the solution, willpower alone is not enough. Environmental factors strongly influence lifestyle and health-related behaviour. In addition, genetic susceptibility plays a major role in why some people become obese and others do not in this obesigenic environment. There is strong evidence to support the establishment of a national research programme on obesity commensurate with the magnitude of the problem in Ireland.

An initiative that has been successful in recent years is the rollout of improved sporting facilities in local communities. The uptake in local GAA clubs, athletics clubs and other amateur sports is rising. However, action is required to improve the equity of the distribution of sporting facilities, particularly in socially disadvantaged areas.

A particular population that need to be introduced to sport and fitness are women in the lower socio-economic bracket, especially in urban areas. These women are less likely to have engaged in sport of any kind and coupled with the fact that they are more likely have poorer levels of educational attainment they are group that require particular targeting within the Public Health Policy. Occupational therapists have experience of engaging with many groups offering targeted lifestyle redesign programmes, including self-care, nutrition, healthy cooking, budgeting, home maintenance, parenting and leisure enhancement.

Research has shown that if people can self-refer to psychosocial services, e.g. stress management groups, you get a higher uptake from people from lower socio-economic groups. The marketing of these services can also have an impact e.g. a better uptake comes from using plain English, solution focused titles on services like ‘improving self-confidence’ rather than ‘managing depression’.

Targeted actions to improve the public health of the Irish population are best initiated at a primary care level. The challenge in implementing this is the demand for increase primary care professionals and the disparity in skill sets and foci across different primary care teams. Current service demands preclude many primary care teams from having a preventative or
health promotion focus. The allocation of a dedicated team member in each primary care team to focus on health promotion and address health inequality is one possible solution.

Responding to the real and growing public health challenges in Ireland will require not only a world-class policy and strategy (top-down approach) but bottom-up actions that are evidence-based to deliver change in the lives of citizens. Moving public health interventions out the hospital and clinic environment and into the normative environment of people’s everyday lives and communities will broaden the reach that the Public Health Policy and Strategy will have. Occupational therapists have know for a long time of the challenge of transfer of training, i.e. teaching someone new skills in a clinic does not necessarily mean these skills will be usable or used by the person in their everyday lives. For this reason occupational therapists strive to assess and treat people in the environment of their everyday lives, where possible, in order to maximise the relevance and effectiveness of intervention.

**AOTI Recommendations for ‘Your Health is Your Wealth’**

The AOTI makes the following recommendations for the development and implementation of the Government’s new Public Health Policy and Strategy:

1. The occupational therapy perspective and lifestyle redesign approach taken by occupational therapists should inform the development and implementation of the Public Health Policy and Strategy

2. The Public Health Policy and Strategy should establish a community-based programme of targeted actions to address individual, lifestyle and environmental determinants of the major public health risks identified, e.g. obesity, alcohol misuse, cardiac disease and the needs of the ageing population. Occupational therapists are well placed to lead on the design and delivery of such programmes

3. The overall objectives of the Public Health Policy should be informed by the six policy objectives of Fair Society, Healthy Lives (Marmot, 2010), which are:
   i. Give every child the best start in life
   ii. Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
   iii. Create fair employment and good work for all
   iv. Ensure healthy standard of living for all
   v. Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities
   vi. Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention

4. The Public Health Policy should clearly distinguish between social determinants of health for the overall population and the social determinants of inequities in health, as a baseline for tackling health inequalities in Ireland.
References


For more information please contact:

The Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland
PO Box 11555,
Ground Floor Office,
Bow Bridge House,
Bow Lane,
Kilmainham,
Dublin 8

Or email: info@aoti.ie