Celebrating 100 Years of Occupational Therapy Education at U of T

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Author: Sandra Sokoloff

The Department of Occupational Science & Occupational Therapy kicked off its centenary year last week with an enthusiastic breakfast celebration marking – to the day – the first classes in Canada held for “ward aides” who worked with injured WW1 soldiers to enable them to return to their communities.

Recognized on Feb. 21, 2018 in the Globe and Mail's Moment in Time feature, the 100th anniversary gathering offered over 100 guests the opportunity to reflect on the past and celebrate a healthy future ahead for the profession.

The emphasis of the U of T program when it began was on preparing those soldiers to return to work, noted Professor Susan Rappolt, Chair of the Department of Occupational Science & Occupational Therapy. The ward aides program evolved into the Diploma Program in Occupational Therapy in 1926; the P&OT Diploma Program in 1950; the BScOT program in 1971; and the current MScOT program in 2001.

Prof. Rappolt recognized the leadership of the three most recent chairs who have, collectively, created the Department of OS&OT: Robin Schaffer (Director of OT, 1983-1991), Emerita Professor Judith Friedland (Director of OT, 1991-93; Chair, Dept. of OT, 1993-99), and Professor Helene Polatajko (Chair, Dept. of OS&OT, 2000-2008).

And the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine was on-hand to help celebrate the evolution and achievements of the U of T department. “Through its commitment to excellence in teaching and research, this department is literally helping to chart the course of practice in occupational therapy,” said Dean Trevor Young, but “ultimately, the success of this department is really its graduates, those working in practice, day in and day out, who are looking to improve the lives of their clients.”
Dean Young drew attention to the previous week’s announcement of the expansion of the MScOT program by 40 new spots at the University of Toronto Mississauga. In addition to providing opportunities for highly qualified applicants and for synergies with colleagues at UTM and Peel Regional health care providers, this expansion provides an opportunity to re-embrace a community-based practice, away from the trend to medicalized OT practice and back to the profession’s roots. “This all leads to a future, I believe, where OTs will be even more integrated into healthcare delivery then before.”

The Honourable Carolyn Bennett [MD’74], Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, spoke passionately about her journey in understanding the teachings of the medicine wheel in contrast to the medical model, “the balance between the physical-mental-emotional-spiritual that the elders and Indigenous people have known for a very long time.” Noting the profession’s roots in addressing mental health and its community-based approach to care, Minister Bennett commented that “the kind of work you do in community by asking the right questions -- not ‘what’s the matter with you,’ but ‘what happened to you’ – is the way we will move [forward] on trauma-informed care. We have to be asking different questions, and you’re setting an amazing path to be there for the people in our communities.”

Ontario Minister of Labour, the Honourable Kevin Flynn, acknowledged the diverse roles occupational therapists play in helping people lead meaningful and productive lives, not only as health care providers, but as leaders and advocates: “You’re that very important voice that helps to ensure that government policies serve the interests of people they’re designed to serve, who have often been marginalized from the mainstream. It’s compassion, I think, more than anything else that really changes the world for the better, and I think you exhibit that in spades in your profession.”

Attendees included former Faculty of Medicine Deans Fred Lowy and John Dirks, former Chair of the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine Emeritus Professor Morris [Mickey] Milner, PT/OT Alumni Association President, Sheila Ritcey, government representatives, community partners, alumni, current and past faculty members, students and friends of the Department of Occupational Science & Occupational Therapy, and faculty and staff of cognate programs.

In addition to a wonderfully catered breakfast, a curated display of archival photos, news, and material objects was on display for guests to explore the Department’s history. Centenary celebrations are planned throughout the year, with the Thelma Cardwell Lecture (Heidi Cramm, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Rehabilitation Therapy, Queen’s University, and Head of Knowledge Translation, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research) coming up on May 9, 2018. Professor Cramm’s lecture is titled: 100 Years later: How trauma continues to shape occupational therapy.

Faculty of Medicine, Dean’s Office