

# Defining the role of occupational therapy in cancer survivorship



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## Background

- Cancer survivorship is defined as “people who have finished primary treatment and have the need and desire to move forward in their lives, excluding palliative and hospice care.”<sup>1</sup>
- Cancer survivorship is increasing, with many cancers being considered chronic diseases needing primary care management.<sup>2</sup>
- Australian occupational therapists commonly work in palliative care or acute oncology services, but are less commonly involved with cancer survivors. Yet, many cancer survivors describe unmet needs in psychosocial, cognitive, sexual and daily living areas, suggesting that occupational therapy could play a larger role in cancer rehabilitation.<sup>3</sup>
- Occupational therapists have much to offer in assisting cancer survivors to identify meaningful roles and occupations, negotiate realistic goals and expectations, optimise occupational performance, facilitate return to work, and ultimately improve the experience of survivorship.

## Research question

What is the nature of current Australian occupational therapy practice with cancer survivors across practice specialities?

## Study aims

- To identify perceptions of Australian occupational therapists about best practice in cancer survivorship interventions and to identify perceived barriers to implementing best practice.

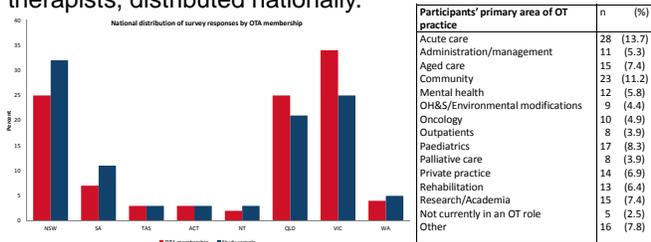


## Method

Following ethical approval, a cross-sectional online survey was developed to be accessible to a large reference group of Australian occupational therapists, and a link to the survey was distributed to 5090 members of Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA). A reminder was sent out two weeks later. OTA recipients were encouraged to pass the link on to any non-member occupational therapists they knew. Survey items were developed from a review of international and Australian literature on occupational therapy programs for people with cancer, cancer survivorship and unmet support needs. The survey was piloted and reviewed by oncology occupational therapy staff at the Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney. Survey data were entered into SPSS for analysis, and free text responses were coded and grouped into themes.

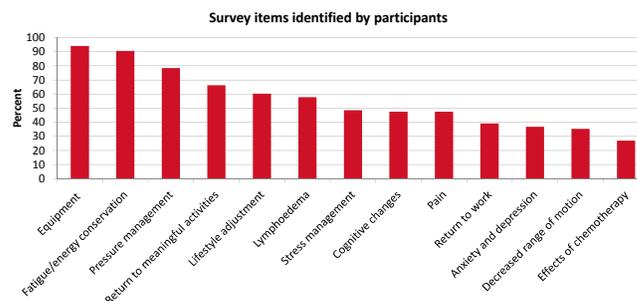
## Results

Responses were received from 230 occupational therapists, distributed nationally.



A total of 72 (35.2%) of participants indicated that they worked with people with cancer either everyday or frequently.

## Issues addressed by occupational therapy



## Issues not addressed by occupational therapy

Open responses indicated the following were not addressed: Leisure (n=10), return to work (n=7), community follow-up (n=5), survivorship issues (n=4) and sexuality (n=3).

## Education needed for occupational therapists

Only 39.7% of participants felt that occupational therapists should be required to undertake extra training before working with people with cancer. Comments included necessary technical training, transferable skills and experience, inclusion in pre-registration programs, counselling skills and on the job mentoring.

## Barriers to best occupational therapy practice

Key barriers were lack of funding for occupational therapy positions (n=103, 50.5%), lack of recognition of the occupational therapy role (n=86, 42.2%) and dominance of the medical model in oncology management (n=71, 34.8%).

## Implications

- Need to address therapeutic gaps for cancer survivors and address barriers to best practice
- Strategies include research on effective occupational therapy interventions, promotion of the occupational therapy role, and defining further the scope of practice for occupational therapy in cancer survivorship.

## REFERENCES

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2. Jiwa, M., Packer, T., Merriman, G., et al. (2008). Timely cancer diagnosis and management as a chronic condition: Opportunities for primary care. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 189, 78-82.
3. Maher, E., & Makin, W. (2007). Life after cancer treatment: A spectrum of chronic survivorship conditions. *Clinical Oncology*, 19, 743-745.