

The job of an occupational therapist

People needing occupational therapy are those with medical conditions or disabilities that have affected their ability to perform the activities of daily life.

For instance, patients who have medical conditions such as stroke, diabetes and Parkinson's disease may be unable to perform daily tasks such as working, feeding or writing.

The main aim of occupational therapy is to increase or restore their ability to perform those activities.

The occupational therapist's job encompasses motor and cognitive abilities, and spans all ages.

For instance, he may help a stroke patient who has lost much of the use of his dominant arm to regain some ability to write, feed himself and get dressed.

He may also help a driver with diabetes, who needed an amputation of his right leg, return to driving a modified car with the help of a driving instructor who has such a car.

Paediatric occupational therapists tackle developmental problems such as autism, developmental coordination disorders, speech and language delay, behavioural difficulties and learning delays.

These children often have difficulties carrying out education-related and functional tasks including self-care, writing, play and social participation.

Occupational therapy was first available here only in the 1940s, said Ms Florence Cheong, president of the Singapore Association of Occupational Therapists (SOAT).

At first, the occupational therapists here were all expatriates, she said.

"It was only when the Government sent Singaporeans overseas to be trained as occupational therapists in later years that we started having local people in the profession," she said.

In 1992, Singapore started the first local cohort of occupational therapy trainees at the Nanyang Polytechnic. They graduated in 1995.

The polytechnic is still the only one that trains occupational therapists, Ms Cheong said. It does this through a three-year diploma course.

The Singapore Institute of Technology announced last week that it is launching a new degree programme in occupational therapy.

It will offer a Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy in partnership with the renowned Trinity College Dublin in Ireland.

The programme will take in its first students in August this year.

Singapore has about 600 qualified occupational therapists, the SOAT estimated.

The actual figure will be known when all therapists here register themselves with a new regulatory body called the Allied Health Professions Council.

In January last year, the Allied Health Professions Bill was passed in Parliament, requiring physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists to do so.

The therapists will receive tiered registration based on their training and practice experience.

To raise public awareness about occupational therapy, the SOAT and occupational therapy departments in hospitals and in other health institutions have been holding Occupational Therapy Day every January since 2006. This year, it was on Jan 14.