BOOK REVIEW

Ruth M Watson and Leslie Swartz (editors) Transformation through occupation. Whurr Publishers. London and Philadelphia, 2004. ISBN 1-86156-425-2. Paperback pp. 300. Price £25.00

This book presents “the philosophy and practice of occupational therapy as viewed through the lens of South Africa”. The authors aim to challenge readers to re-think and re-imagine the occupational therapy process in the context of developing countries and “in the increasingly complex, diverse and multicultural environments throughout the world”. The text is described as a resource to be used in a variety of ways but is ultimately designed to stimulate thinking and experimentation about the meaning of occupational therapy. The 20 chapters are grouped into themes covering the constructs and context of occupational therapy, contextual issues that impact on occupations, service implications and occupation in action and the challenge of transformation.

The range of topics covered in this book is wide and diverse. They range from play to spirituality, from disability to the rehabilitation of offenders. The authors discuss these issues and their relationship with occupational therapy in a way that makes their writing relevant to us all. The process of identifying and articulating such links is a process that would be relevant to any healthcare profession in any society. It is well researched, written by a range of contributors from both practice and academic backgrounds and supported throughout by well-referenced evidence.

I found this a very powerful book, which was very readable. I dipped into it on several long train journeys and always found it very interesting and stimulating. I revisited some chapters that had left a particular impression and found it had challenged my thinking about my own practice as a physiotherapist and as an educator. I learnt a lot about South Africa and a lot about occupational therapy. It firmly embeds professional practice in a cultural, sociological and political framework and challenges the reader to examine his/her own practice in such a context.

I particularly enjoyed the chapters “Women empowered through occupation: from deprivation to realized potential” and “Grandmothers affected by HIV/AIDS: new roles and occupations”. These made real the link between the practice of occupational therapy and the society in which it is grounded. The lived experiences of real individuals are used to illustrate the transformation that can occur in the face of real deprivation and adverse conditions. This approach is summed up by the author of the chapter on grandmothers thus: “As humans, we all like good stories. Focusing on these stories can help develop our community practice”. This use of stories helps to make meaningful a book, which is examining profound and complex issues.

There is an extremely useful chapter on “Rethinking professional ethics”, which would be invaluable in stimulating debate no matter in which country or health profession one was practising. It addresses some issues that are not always thought of or discussed in ethical terms, such as “Having fun? Occupational therapists’ enjoyment of their work as an ethical issue” and “The political is personal: occupational therapist as citizen”.

If this book is a reflection of the current state of occupational therapy practice in South Africa, then the future of that profession is in safe hands. Physiotherapists would do well, and physiotherapy would benefit enormously, if we followed this lead and examined our own profession in this way.

Dr. Pennie Roberts
Head of Department of Physiotherapy
Manchester Metropolitan University