

An Update From AOTA President Amy Lamb and the Board of Directors on Payment of Fieldwork Sites in Occupational Therapy Education

November 11, 2016

In the last 3 to 5 years, occupational therapy education programs for the occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant have started receiving notification from fieldwork sites requesting payment to compensate for affiliating Fieldwork Level I and Fieldwork Level II students. More recently the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) were notified by a large multisite rehabilitation provider that it will be implementing a policy requiring a payment for all affiliating students from OT, PT, and SLP programs. The letter noted that the policy change was due to a number of factors, including but not limited to changes in reimbursement and practice demands. The fieldwork sites have also noted the increased demand from schools for fieldwork placements.

History in Other Professions

While new to OT, payment for affiliating clinical students and residents has been the practice in a number of other health professions (e.g., medicine, nurse practitioners, physician assistants) (Brown, 2016; Glavez, Alexander, Curtis, & Eskes, 2014; Mangan, 2010; Physician Assistant Education Association [PAED], n.d.a). In each case the practice grew out of an increased demand for clinical placement sites following a period of marked growth in the number of schools and enrollment across the disciplines. The 2013 Clerkship Survey (PAEA, n.d.b) of schools of medicine, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants noted that the payments have not always been initiated by the clinical site(s), with some programs offering payments as an incentive for facilities to take their students (PAEA, n.d.a).

Why Now in OT?

Between 2007 and 2015, the number of OT programs grew from 147 to 215 (45%) and the number of OTA programs grew from 128 to 251 (96%). During this period, the number of OT students grew from 12,246 to 19,314 (58%) and the number of OTA students grew from 4,921 to 10,241 (123%) (AOTA, 2015). While the growth in academic programs has been in response to workforce demands, it has placed unprecedented demand on fieldwork programs. It is not surprising that the changing market demands being placed on fieldwork facilities have led to the expansion of the practice of payment for fieldwork placements seen in other professions. As in other professions, this is being initiated both by the fieldwork site(s) and by academic OT/OTA programs offering payments as an incentive for facilities to take their students.

Implications for Education

The implementation of payment for fieldwork sites will have a significant impact on all of the stakeholders in occupational therapy education. Fieldwork education is a critical component of educating competent and ethical practitioners. As such, key stakeholders (i.e., academic fieldwork coordinators, fieldwork educators, students) must work collaboratively to ensure the ethical development and implementation of fieldwork education programs that meet professional standards for developing knowledge and skills as well as appropriate professional, ethical conduct (AOTA, 2014).

Addressing the Fieldwork Challenges

At its November 2016 meeting, the AOTA Board of Directors noted that the practice of payment for fieldwork sites is just one of the many complex challenges facing the viability of the existing fieldwork and experiential components of occupational therapy education programs for the occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant. **The Board voted to establish an ad hoc committee to explore current experiential requirements in OT education and alternative models that would best ensure future entry-level practitioners are prepared to meet the occupational needs of society.** The ad hoc committee is to provide a draft report with recommendations to the AOTA Board of Directors for their February 2017 meeting.

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