



MEDIA RELEASE

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CALL TO REGULATE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS

People with disabilities, developmental problems and mental illnesses remain at risk of injury and death because Australia lacks a national registration system for Occupational Therapists.

Industry body the Council of Occupational Therapists Registration Boards (Australia and New Zealand) (COTRB) wants the Federal Government to include the profession in a national registration and accreditation scheme for health professionals due to launch next year.

COTRB Chairman Jim Carmichael urged the Australian Health and Ministers Advisory Council (AHMAC) to subject Occupational Therapists to similar controls that regulate other health professions such as doctors, dentists, nurses, chiropractors and podiatrists.

Mr Carmichael said while Occupational Therapists were regulated in half of the states and territories of Australia, those in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and ACT did not have to be registered.

He said this lack of accountability had contributed to tragedies such as the death of a woman with Downs Syndrome in Tasmania after an Occupational Therapist did not properly attach bed rails and the death of a child in New South Wales when a postural harness was improperly fitted to a wheelchair.

In both cases, coroners found the unregistered therapists had contributed to the deaths.

"Occupational Therapists work in private practice and public settings with some of the most vulnerable members of our community, - people with disabilities, children and the elderly - trying to improve their quality of life," Mr Carmichael said.

"It is imperative that we further protect these vulnerable people by ensuring strict standards are met in all facets of their care.

"Australia is one of the few countries in the world where no national regulation scheme exists – countries comparable to Australia such as the UK, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, recognise the value of regulating this profession and even places like Iran, Uganda and Thailand manage to have a national regulation system in place. It is beyond belief that Australia can't get its act together and regulate Occupational Therapists"

Mr Carmichael said that without national safeguards people who were unqualified and untrained practitioners could treat those with chronic illness and disabilities, compromising health outcomes and possibly causing injury and death.

"National registration of Occupational Therapists will protect the public by ensuring therapy is delivered in a professional, ethical and competent way as well as enabling the public to have a clearer pathway for lodging complaints," he said.

"It will also instill confidence in the public that they can recognise and be treated by a professional and fully trained Occupational Therapist."

Tomorrow, an Australian Health Ministers Conference (AHMC) will meet to discuss the national scheme, set to launch in July, 2010.

Ten professions, which are already registered in each state and territory, will be included in the scheme when it launches.

Mr Carmichael said Occupational Therapists aimed to be included in the scheme in its next round, along with other health professions currently being prioritised by the AHMC.

"It is our understanding that Occupational Therapy is not among the prioritised professions for the next round and we want the AHMC to consider our therapists for national registrations as a matter of urgency," Mr Carmichael said.

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Background

COTRB and OT Australia have lodged a submission to the Australian Workforce Principles Committee for inclusion in the national registration and accreditation scheme, due to be launched on 1 July, 2010.

Health professionals currently listed in the scheme include physiotherapists, optometrists nurses and midwives, chiropractors, pharmacists, dentists, doctors, psychologists, podiatrists and osteopaths.

Occupational therapy promotes health and wellbeing through occupation. It has an established body of teachable knowledge, standards of practice and defined functional competencies that equip practitioners to work collaboratively with people with a disability or impairment, and who experience barriers to participation in work, family or other life experience.

The profession's primary goal is to enable people to participate in everyday life.

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