

Ethics and Professionalism in A Changing World

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Scenario A:

During the process of a seating and mobility assessment the client is assessed and equipment is evaluated and decisions are made. The therapist however, states to the vendor that she does not know the proper way to complete the funding form and asks the vendor representative to fill in the form for her. The vendor does so, and sends the form in to the funding agency. The therapist does not ask for a copy for her files. Once dispensing the equipment, the vendor finds that he does not have the prescribed back support in stock but has many of another type. He substitutes the back support for the one in stock and does not notify the therapist. Once the client receives the equipment, he notices the change in back support and notifies his vendor and therapist. The vendor states that this is what was prescribed. The therapist is unsure of an answer because she did not complete the funding form and does not have a copy to check. Her written notes are unclear.

The definition of professionalism is “the standards, views and behaviour of one who engages in an activity.” The definition of ethics is “the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group.”.

So then, what do we mean when we state that a colleague is acting unprofessionally or unethically? What exactly are we referring to and what are the repercussions to such actions?

The College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario defines the Code of Ethics as an obligation to the public, profession and as professional practitioners:

“The Code of Ethics is a set of values and principles intended to provide all registrants with information about the College’s expectations of ethical conduct. It is a framework that describes the boundaries of acceptable professional practice....Additionally, this document is intended to assist clients and other members of the public to better understand the standards for ethical care that they should expect from an occupational therapist.”

The Alberta College of Occupational Therapists defines the Code of Ethics as” the values and principles intended to guide the conduct of regulated occupational therapists...” It further outlines respect, integrity and competence as essential components of ethical practice.

There are both regulated and non-regulated health professions. Those that are regulated must be registered with the governing body or College. Registration with the governing body assures the public that the individual has met entry to practice requirements and follows the outlines standards of practice. Colleges of regulated health professions have complaints and discipline processes. An individual’s ability to hold their professional title and practice/work in the profession can be suspended and /or revoked if a complaint is validated.

However, within the durable medical equipment /Assistive Technology industry, there are both regulated and non-regulated professionals working together within the team. How then, is professionalism and ethical behaviour maintained by all parties in order to best meet the needs of our clients? Although we work as a team, each team member has to comply with his/her own ‘rules’ and ‘standards’. Each team member has a different role in educating the client, documenting, assessing, prescribing and dispensing. There are no perfectly defined processes to ensure that each client assessment and equipment dispensing is completed in exactly the same manner each time. If one member of the team is acting

outside of what are considered standards of practice, what are the possible repercussions and effects on the overall professionalism of the team?

Scenario B:

A community therapist is referred to assess a client in regards to seating and mobility needs. She completes her assessment and with the help of an equipment vendor, has the client evaluate various components to determine the best system to prescribe. The therapist then writes a report and completes a prescription and sends it to the funding agency. The funding agency representative, who is not a clinician, looks at the cost of the system and determines that this is too expensive. The report and prescription are sent to another therapist, one who works in conjunction with the funding agency. The funding agency therapist does not speak to the client or prescribing therapist. She does not meet and assess the client. From the report and prescription, she determines that the seating system can be changed to lower cost components and relays the information back to the funding agency with examples of substitute products. Funding is approved and a second vendor is asked to provide the equipment. The equipment is ordered, delivered to the client and no therapist is present.

The client is not provided with an explanation except told that this system is what was approved for funding. Within a short time, the client experiences pain and development of a postural deformity. The client also develops a pressure ulcer. Because of postural instability, the client slides and falls from the wheelchair, injuring himself in the process. The client calls the original therapist with this news....

Both scenario A and B lead to many questions. Who is liable? Who advocates for the client? What are the clinical, vendor and funding agency issues? There are so many unethical and unprofessional issues that arise in both of these cases, but in the end, the one who suffers is the client.

How do we as an industry ensure that all team members are qualified, educated and maintain high standards of practice? Initial training, continuing education, peer groups, networking all assist in providing some components of high standards, but maintenance of the standards is a challenging process. In Canada, each profession and each province have varying rules. In the United States, the situation is similar. However, in the recent past, some changes in the US have been implemented to assist in more consistency of standards for evaluation and provision of equipment. Medicare now requires the evaluation of the "Complex Rehab" category of equipment to be completed by an Assistive Technology Professional (ATP). In some states, Medicaid requires an ATP certification in order to provide custom seating and powered mobility. The ATP certified individual is a "Service provider who analyzes the needs of consumers with disabilities, assist in selection of appropriate assistive technology for the consumer's needs, and provide training in the use of the selected device(s)." This certification is offered by RESNA (Rehabilitation Engineering Society of North America.) An ATP is an internationally recognized certification and "promotes a standard for recognizing qualifications and validating broad-based knowledge required as the foundation for safe and effective service in the field of assistive technology." In addition to the Assistive Technology Professional certification, there is now the Seating & Mobility Specialist (SMS) certification for those individuals who specialize in the comprehensive seating, positioning and mobility needs of clients with disabilities.

Is this type of certification the way to go in our industry in Canada? Maybe. Are there other ways that we, as an industry of professionals with varying levels of education and focus can ensure high quality work, maintenance of standards and ethical/professional behaviour?

Definitions:

What is Licensure?

- Licensing applies to individuals
- Granted by a government body
- Individual meets predetermined qualifications
- Grants right to engage in a particular profession as defined by the licensing body
- Requires adherence to Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice
- Mandatory within licensed profession

What is Certification?

- Process by which a non-governmental agency or association validates an individual's qualifications and knowledge in a defined functional or clinical area

Why have certification?

- Validate individual's qualifications
- Carries a connotation of trust, belief, and confidence
- Provide practice-related knowledge-based requirements against which an individual can be assessed
- Requires adherence to Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice
- Voluntary

RESNA Certification:

www.resna.org/certification

Certification of a service provider, in any field, is the process by which a non-governmental agency or association validates an individual's qualifications and knowledge in a defined functional or clinical area. Candidates for certification typically must meet specific requirements to be eligible for certification, and those declared eligible must pass an examination. RESNA offers national certification for three specialties:

Assistive Technology Professional (ATP)

Service provider who analyzes the needs of consumers with disabilities, assist in selection of appropriate assistive technology for the consumer's needs, and provide training in the use of the selected device(s).

Seating and Mobility Specialist (SMS)

An ATP who specializes in the comprehensive seating, positioning, and mobility needs of consumers with disabilities.

Rehabilitation Engineering Technologist (RET)

An ATP who applies engineering principles to the design, modification, customization, and/or fabrication of assistive technology for persons with disabilities.

Why Should I Become Certified?

Each certification promotes a standard for recognizing qualifications and validating broad-based knowledge required as the foundation for safe and effective service in the field of assistive technology. These standards aim to enhance service provision to people with disabilities who are seeking technology applications to maximize their ability to function in their environment. The credential achieved through each certification program promotes quality assurance for the consumer, is a source of pride for the service provider, and promotes a standard of professional practice for the field. Thousands of rehabilitation engineers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and hearing pathologists, suppliers, educators and other professionals have been certificants.

This is definitely something that we all need to think about.

References:

Alberta College of Occupational Therapists
www.acot.ca

College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario
www.coto.org

Rehabilitation Engineering Society of North America (RESNA)
www.resna.org