

Conference Abstract

Preparing occupational therapy students for practice in rural areas: initial results of a scoping review

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Introduction: Despite workforce growth in occupational therapy (OT), the profession is maldistributed to urban spaces, limiting access to its service and, consequently, affecting health outcomes for rural communities. Preparing students for rural practice is an effective educational strategy that improves recruitment and retention in rural areas; however, the characteristics of preparation strategies employed by education providers is unclear.

Method: We conducted a scoping review of all literature describing strategies to prepare students for rural and remote practice, prior to enrolment, during the program, or on graduation. We systematically searched seven databases and conducted a focused grey literature search for manuscripts. We searched these databases in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese languages and included manuscripts in all of these languages. Ethics approval was not required for this study.

Results: Initial results identified 185 manuscripts published between 1974 and 2023, mostly in English, which described a range of strategies being used to prepare students for rural practice. We applied a matrix framework comparing when the strategy was used (pre-, during, or post-enrolment) with target groups (individuals, groups or communities), and alignment to the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended strategies for development of rural health professionals.

Discussion: Preliminary results suggest student placement in rural areas is the main strategy used for student preparation for rural practice. Considering the pressure rural healthcare workers are under, such as under-resourcing and understaffing, it raises the question as to whether relying so heavily on rural supervisors to prepare our students for rural practice is sustainable.

Conclusion: Given there are nine other education strategies suggested by the WHO, there may be opportunities to expand preparation practices to support student development. Further research is required to identify which strategies are most effective in preparing students for rural practice.

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