

NEWS FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK



*“Our reality is
changing so rapidly.”*

Many of our occupational therapists, technicians/assistants and student volunteers are at the coal face of our nationwide efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and save lives. South Africa, like many other countries in our region, has much fewer resources than most developed countries, and by all reports, is struggling with the enormity of the COVID-19 problem. The National Department of Health and some of the Provincial Departments of Health are on record in saying that there is a shortage of essential tests and personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic is precipitating a set of events unprecedented in our lifetime and requires a professional commitment from each one of us in solidarity with the national cause. At present, some of our members by nature of their employment, have no choice but to rise to the occasion, while others have chosen to serve or volunteer.

To date OTASA has concentrated our efforts on:

1. *Providing critical and accurate information about COVID-19;*
2. *Describing the role of OT and our contribution specific to this Pandemic;*
3. *Providing guidelines for telehealth, so that OTs can continue to provide critical services to other patients whose rehabilitation is affected by the national lock down;*
4. *Negotiating with medical funders regarding payment for telehealth services, something which few rehabilitation professionals in South Africa have experience of.*

OTs have fought long and hard to be recognised as an essential service. We cannot choose to be an essential service under routine health care, but unessential in the face of a national disaster. So, the time to “stand up and be counted”, in many ways and perhaps unexpectedly, has arrived. The Hippocratic oath we all took on graduation will be a guiding light as will our code of ethics.

Today we turn our attention to those OTs who are employed in the public sector and other hospitals and clinics who are being called on to contribute in different ways to the national effort.

We are receiving reports that different provinces are dealing with the staff deployment to fight the pandemic differently. The autonomy of provinces in health care allows them to do that and to make decisions about their staff and what they are expected to do within the context of the local health effort.

We have had reports that OTs have been required to perform tasks by their line managers which are important to relieve key staff, but which are outside our key performance areas but aligned to our basic knowledge and first aid skill. Before you undertake such an activity, please ensure that you receive training in what to do, so you can do it safely and efficiently.

There is an international shortage of PPE. Specialised PPE is going to be reserved for the frontline workers. All OTs must:

- Practice social distancing without question;
- Hand hygiene as has been directed with hand sanitiser or soap. If this is not available, try and make your own;
- Wear a mask. We know that these are in short supply, so let's try and be innovative and make our own following the precautions for repeated use. Do not ignore these.
- Protect your family by bathing in hot water before any contact, using separate cutlery and washing your clothes in hot water.

We see how hard you all are working to serve our patients, our communities and country. The ways in which you have come together, confirms that when we combine our resources and talents, we can have the greatest impact for patients and the communities we serve.

With deep appreciation,

Prof. Pat de Witt

President: OTASA

