

Occupational Health Nursing: A Sustainable Practice?

By Dianne Dyck

For years, Occupational Health Nursing has been a viable profession. However, times are changing and many of the traditional roles of the Occupational Health Nurse (OHN) have been taken over by other disciplines. The competition has been aggressive and steadily moving into the workplace offering services that OHNs are qualified to provide.

This article is designed to explore what can be done to address this situation. It will explain the current situation state and market pressures; identify the knowledge and skills that OHNs must possess to succeed; and offer some actions aimed at the sustainability of Occupational Health Nursing profession.

Introduction

The Occupational Health Nurse (OHN) is defined as “a registered nurse who has graduated from an accredited occupational health nursing program and/or who has achieved the level of COHN(C) with the Canadian Nurses Association”.¹ OHNs take specialized education in Occupational Health & Safety, and their practice is based on knowledge gained primarily from:

1. Nursing;
2. Medicine;
3. Ergonomics;
4. Epidemiology;
5. Environmental sciences;
6. Occupational health and safety (OH&S);
7. Social/behavioural sciences;
8. Business management;
9. Program administration;
10. Educational concepts and practices; and
11. Legal/regulatory requirements.²

In addition, OHN's possess specialized competencies in the domains of:

- Occupational Health Nursing practice;
- Identification, evaluation and control of workplace hazards;
- Health monitoring and surveillance;
- Assessment, care and case management of injuries and illnesses (Disability Management);
- Health, safety and wellness promotion; and
- Health, safety and wellness management.³

¹ Alberta Occupational Health Nurses Association (AOHNA), (2016). “OHN Definition”. AOHNA Executive Team, Calgary, AB.

² CNA Certification Blueprint, 2017, at: https://nurseone.ca/~media/nurseone/files/en/occupational_health_blueprint_and_competencies_e.pdf#page=8?la=en

³ CNA Certification Blueprint, 2017, at: https://nurseone.ca/~media/nurseone/files/en/occupational_health_blueprint_and_competencies_e.pdf#page=8?la=en

The roles of the OHN are numerous and encompass working as a specialist in one, or all, of the following roles clinician, specialist, manager, co-ordinator, advisor, health educator, counsellor; researcher⁴, mentor, and/or entrepreneur. Hence, the OHN:

- Functions as an advocate for health and safety in the workplace;
- Practices in a holistic manner and understands that individuals are unique;
- Consults and collaborates with colleagues, professional and industry associations, as well as individuals and groups, both internal and external to the organization;
- Acts as a subject matter expert for employers, employees, unions, colleagues and other stakeholders;
- Understands that health and safety culture is an important component in determining the direction, support and influence of the workplace;
- Practises in a variety of work settings, including any location or equipment at, upon, in or near the place at which a worker works; and
- Practises independently and interdependently in the workplace demonstrating responsibility, accountability and leadership, and providing direction.

The scope of Occupational Health Nursing Practice (Figure 1), can positively impact the organization, the workplace environment, the employees and the community at large.

Figure 1: Scope of Occupational Health Nursing Practice⁵



It includes the:

- Promotion of workplace health, safety and wellness;
- Prevention of illness and injury in the workplace;
- Care and recovery of employees (workers):
- Enhancement of employee and organizational health;

⁴ WHO. (2001). *The Role of the Occupational Health Nurse in Workplace Health Management*

⁵ Dyck, D. (2015). *Occupational Health & Safety: Theory, Strategy & Industry Practice, 3rd ed.*, and is printed with permission from LexisNexis Canada Inc.

- Business management and administration; and
- Support of a safe and healthy workplace.⁶

Current Situation and Market Pressures

In Canada, OHNs practice within an organization as an internal consultant, or externally, as an external consultant. Specifically, OHNs help organizations to:

- Plan, develop, implement, manage and evaluate Occupational Health Programs and the related services;
- Facilitate occupational health and safety, disability management and workplace wellness efforts with internal and external players;
- Provide health assessment and surveillance of the worker;
- Perform assessments and surveillance of the workplace;
- Coordinate and/or perform emergency response services;
- Treat, counsel and refer employees;
- Develop and manage/ coordinate health assessment and surveillance programs;
- Develop and manage/coordinate Disability Management Programs;
- Coordinate effective treatment and/or referrals;
- Facilitate safe and timely return-to-work opportunities for recovering ill/injured employees;
- Liaise with management, the worker and/or external resources such as:
 - Physicians;
 - Therapists;
 - Rehabilitation specialist;
 - Employees' Compensation Board(s);
 - Insurance providers;
 - Employee Assistance Program counsellors; and
 - Other allied health professionals;
- Engage in workplace health promotion activities;
- Provide workplace education and training;
- Act as a vital link between workplace stakeholder groups such as the workers, employer and union(s); and
- Build strong relationships with workers and their families.

The value offered by OHNs to an organization includes assisting with *operational efficiency*, *loss control and injury/illness management* and *disability management*. In terms of operational efficiency, OHNs:

- Provide customized, integrated OH&S Programs;
- Promote the integration of employee services into the organization's strategic business plans and operations;
- Align OH&S Program goals with corporate/operational goals and objectives;
- Promote worker wellness and fitness-to-work, thereby improving worker productivity, reducing expenses and improving organization/ company profits;
- Assist new workers to integrate into the workplace;

⁶ CNA Certification Blueprint, 2017, at: https://nurseone.ca/~media/nurseone/files/en/occupational_health_blueprint_and_competencies_e.pdf#page=8?la=en

- Monitor the work environment in terms of hazard control, thereby reducing operational downtime, reducing expenses and improving organization/company profits;
- Provide anticipatory guidance on potential workplace problems and offer counselling to enable the organization to avoid/mitigate the negative impacts;
- Monitor worker well-being and workplace injury/illness with a view to loss control and prevention;
- Strive to enhance employee morale by working closely with employees and epitomizing the message that the organization cares for them personally; and
- Promote the organization as a “responsible corporate citizen.

Loss control means minimizing loss due to people, property, process, plant or profit damages/threats. Per Louis Allen (1996), “Minimizing loss is as much of an improvement as is the maximization of profit.” In terms of Occupational Health Nursing, prevention involves the activities associated with “health-protecting behaviour”. The emphasis is on guarding or defending an individual or group against specific illness/injury.

In regards to operational production and service demands, OHNs can support the workplace by:

- Ensuring workers are fit-to-work;
- Ensuring the worksite is free of uncontrolled hazards;
- Medically monitoring workers exposed to known hazards;
- Conducting risk assessments;
- Communicating the nature and severity of identified risks;
- Promoting worker well-being;
- Conducting human factor/ergonomic assessments and identifying suitable remedial actions;
- Participating in emergency response activities;
- Facilitating critical incident stress debriefing post-incident; and
- Assisting with the management of strategic OH&S issues.

In essence, OHNs contribute to promoting and maintaining worker health and safety, as well as workplace safety. By controlling losses, OHNs contribute to the enhancement of the organization’s profits.

OHNs have a major role to play in the areas of injury/illness management and disability management. Through client advocacy — the activity associated with pleading or representing an employee’s or organization’s cause, OHNs act as a client liaison — the position of responsibility within an organization for maintaining communication links with external individuals, agencies or organizations. This translates into reputation management for the employee and organization.

OHNs are ideally educated, skilled, experienced and positioned within an organization to facilitate injury/illness management and disability management. They are competent at:

- Mitigating the workplace illness/injury through timely response and referral for medical treatment;
- Determining worker fitness to work;
- Managing injury/illness cases;
- Co-managing insurer (government/private insurers) responsibilities and actions;

- Coordinating disability management assistance;
- Assisting workers to successfully return to work in a safe and timely manner;
- Negotiating service provider contracts and activities;
- Evaluating the outcomes and determining the return on investment for the organization/company; and
- Conducting trend analyses with a view to illness/injury prevention and the introduction of suitable loss control measures.

In terms of managing a Disability Management Program, the OHN is positioned and capable of:

- Supporting all the operations with the development and implementation of the Disability Management Program and the related practices;
- Assisting the operations and employees with disability management and related labour relations issues and resolutions that may affect employee employability;
- Investigating and assisting with the preparation of WCB reports on behalf of the organization and its employees;
- Supporting the operations and employees with their individual disability management and work accommodation performances;
- Mentoring and coaching line management on attendance and disability management-related issues and practices that can affect employee employability;
- Coordinating disability management services internally and externally with insurers and other healthcare providers;
- Ensuring that employee personal health information is maintained in a confidential manner;
- Providing disability management education;
- Assisting the organization to comply with the applicable legislation (Workers' Compensation Acts, Canada Labour Code, Human Rights legislation) and industry standards for disability management;
- Maintaining the organization's disability management data management system (workers' compensation and non-occupational disabilities);
- Conducting disability management performance audits and preparing the resulting reports;
- Providing strong attendance support and disability management leadership; and
- Representing the organization's business interests on government, industry, and professional committees/forums.

In summary, OHNs are professionals that have much to offer to an organization, union, employees, the workplace environment and the community at large. Yet, ironically, when organizations reorganize, downsize, or merger with another organization, it is often the OHN's position that is jeopardized, and abolished.

Upon examination, it appears that OHNs have not kept pace with the demands of the new world of work and business. As well, many other disciplines have assumed some of the traditional OHN roles. For example, OH&S Service Providers and individual paramedics offer occupational health and safety services and support. Disability Management Service Providers and non-nursing practitioners (Kinesiologists, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Social Workers, Psychologists, and Rehabilitation Specialists) are managing worker illness and injury situations, and developing and managing/coordinating Disability Management Programs.

The Knowledge and Skills OHNs must have to Succeed

To succeed, the OHN needs to possess the knowledge and skills that extend above and beyond the traditional Occupational Health Nursing role. To succeed, the OHN requires a mix of business, relationship, analytical, technical specialist, and consulting skills.

Business Skills

The core management/ business skills include planning, organizing, directing, and controlling the business aspects of the organization, as well as the ability to conceptualize — better known as being able to “see the big picture”. Educational courses in business development and implementation, organizational behaviour, accounting, risk management and communication, information system management, project management, computer systems, business writing, delivering powerful oral presentations, and strategic issues management, position the OHN to “shine within the organization”. The OHN might even elect to undertake a Master in Business Administration.

Relationship Skills

Relationship skills, or people skills, involve the ability to work with and through people to get the work done. They include the ability to communicate, lead and motivate people, as well as the ability to listen, empathize, care for, and support employees in a constructive manner. Skills such as effective communication and interviewing, relationship building, negotiation and mediation, facilitation, team building, effective coaching, client advocacy, and change management should be part of the OHN’s “toolkit”. That kit would also include knowing how to create a supportive work environment, so that employee performance can be maximized.⁷ OHNs are educated and experienced in people skills and can assist the organization to understand, support and value their human capital.

Analytical Skills

Analytical skills involve the ability to visualize, gather information, articulate, analyze, conceptualize, or solve both complex and uncomplicated problems by making decisions that are sensible given the available information.⁸ For the OHN, this translates to possessing advanced skills in root-cause analysis, problem solving, auditing, benchmarking, and program evaluation and improvement. These analytical skills are only as valuable as is the OHN’s ability to “sell” the organization on the importance of the results. Hence, the importance for the OHN to possess strong communication and marketing skills.

Technical Specialist Skills

Technical specialist skills involve the ability to understand and use the techniques, knowledge and tools specific to the industry, or to one’s area of expertise. For OHNs, these skills include:

- Fitness-to-work assessments;

⁷ Roithmayr, T. (2000-2015). Performance Maximizer, described in Dyck, D. (2015). *Occupational Health & Safety: Theory, Strategy & Industry Practice*, 3rd ed. Markham, ON: LexisNexis Canada Inc

⁸ Google (2016). “Analytical Skills Example: What are Analytical Skills and How to Improve Them”, available at: <http://www.job-interview-site.com/analytical-skills-example-what-are-analytical-skills-and-how-to-improve-them.html>; Wikipedia (2016). “Analytical skill”, available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analytical_skill.

- Health surveillance;
- Medical monitoring;
- Emergency care;
- Hazard/risk assessment;
- Worksite evaluation;
- Emergency planning and response;
- Event investigation;
- Disability case management;
- Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD);
- Program development;
- Standard setting;
- Training program development and delivery;
- Professional networking;
- Regulatory knowledge;
- Human factors analysis;
- Technical communication;
- Quality assurance;
- Environment/public health management;
- Social marketing;
- Strategic issues management;
- Health promotion;
- Risk management and communication;
- Program evaluation; and
- Occupational Health Nursing research.

OHNs also need the knowledge and skills in disability management programming, occupational health (ideally OH&S) governance and stewardship, industrial hygiene, workplace wellness programming, epidemiology (the study of disease in humans), and integrated workplace health management. Armed with this technical specialist knowledge, the OHN can present as an expert in the field and serve as a valuable resource to an organization.

Consulting Skills

Consulting skills include the ability to provide influence, recommendations, and expertise in Occupational Health and Occupational Health Nursing, without direct power to make changes. Regardless of the degree of involvement, the consultant does not own the problem: the client always does. Hence, it is up to the client to own the solution.

In preparation for this key role, the OHN should undertake a consulting certificate, like the one offered through the Canadian Society of Safety Engineers. Strong written, oral and non-verbal communication skills are critical. Most colleges and university offer courses in business writing.

In addition to the above skills, the OHN should advance their knowledge by attaining certification in Business Administration, OH&S, Human Resources, Psychological Health and Safety, and ergonomics. Today, the OHN needs to broaden their knowledge and related skills, thereby being viewed as a valuable player in the workplace.

Occupational Health Nursing Sustainability: Recommended Actions

To promote sustainability, Occupational Health Nursing should address the future through actions at several levels. At the *National Level*, the Canadian Nurses Association (CAN) and the Canadian Occupational Health Nurse Association (COHNA) should raise the bar on to the definition of Occupational Health Nursing and OHN competency. A communication strategy aimed at promoting Occupational Health Nursing should be developed so that stakeholders (employers, unions and the public) are knowledgeable about Occupational Health Nursing as a specialty practice; and value the contribution that OHNs offer to the workplace. As well, OHNs should be encouraged to attain Occupational Health Nursing certification at a university/college and the national level. Transfer agreements between CNA and educational institutions/agencies, would help pave the way for OHNs to attain certification in other related fields of study, like Business Administration, Occupational Health and Safety, Human Resources, Psychological Health and Safety, and ergonomics. To motivate OHNs to do so, educational bursaries/awards should be created.

At the *Association Level*, educational sessions aimed at broadening OHN business knowledge and skills should be offered using a variety of delivery modalities. For example, in addition to the traditional workshops and educational days, webinar seminars and interactive teaching videos could be made available; in essence, make access easy. OHNs should be encouraged to attend educational sessions, to promote and market their value to employers, and to learn how best to demonstrate their professional worth to the organization. Coaching and mentoring are practical approaches; setting up an OHN mentorship program to assist OHNs to address the workplace challenges offers powerful individual support.

At the *Individual OHN Level*, OHNs should take control of their professional practice. That means, understanding and embracing what it takes to succeed in today's business scene. Continuous learning, expanding one's knowledge breadth and scope, being a team leader/player, critically evaluating one's practice, and addressing identified shortfalls, are excellent self-promotion approaches. However, a critical piece, is self-confidence in the OHN's competence. OHNs must possess an understanding of their abilities, competencies, and the value offered to the workplace. Without that self-confidence in their professional practice, OHNs cannot "sell themselves" to prospective employers. Seeking and engaging a mentor can be a powerful approach to enhancing the OHN's self-confidence and hence, practice.

Conclusion

Occupational Health Nursing is a profession that all of us have enjoyed and benefited from; but now, it is time to act to ensure its sustainability. The recommended actions presented are but one OHN's ideas of what could be done; power comes from many perspectives towards professional improvement and sustainability. In the interest of your professional future, please work towards the sustainability of our profession.

General Strategies for Sustainability

- Provide general education on Occupational Health Nursing to targeted stakeholders, *e.g.*, access the CNA Journal, OOHNA Journal to reach nurses; Benefits Canada, OHS Magazine Canada, Health & Safety Reporter to reach Human Resources professionals.
- Provide general education to targeted stakeholders on the contribution(s) that OHNs make to the workplace, *e.g.*, Benefits Canada, OHS Magazine Canada, Health & Safety Reporter to reach Human Resources professionals.
- Attract nursing students and Registered Nurses to the field of Occupational Health Nursing by presenting to nursing students, and practicing Registered Nurses.
- Promote CNA Occupational Health Nursing Certification.
- Promote the Occupational Health Nursing competencies and standards.
- Enhance the degree of collaboration among the various Occupational Health Nursing associations in Canada.
- Promote Occupational Health Nursing bursaries and awards.
- Facilitate Occupational Health Nursing education using a variety of educational delivery modalities (in-class courses, online courses, conference workshops, webinar sessions, Continued Education Modules, *etc.*)
- Develop and/or support Master in Business Administration in Occupational Health and Safety Leadership, with a specialty in Occupational Health Nursing.
- Promote research and practice developments in Occupational Health Nursing, *e.g.*, partner with the Institute for Work & Health, or WSIB/WCBs to research Occupational Health Nursing practices.
- Encourage OHNs to publicize (journal articles, books, websites), and present their work at conferences.
- Seek ways to standardize Occupational Health Nursing education.
- Promote OHN entrepreneurship.
- Encourage the COHN to be the minimal employment qualification for OHNs.
- Set up a system of OHN mentors as a practical resource for new OHNs.
- Encourage current OHNs to round out their education, and hence, be better prepared to address the changing workplace.

Dianne Dyck (degdyck2@gmail.com) is a Certified Occupational Health Nurse and Occupational Health & Safety Specialist who has worked for private and public-funded agencies to develop Occupational Health, Occupational Health & Safety, Disability Management, and Workplace Wellness programs. As an educator, Dianne has developed a number of courses in the fields of Disability Management, Occupational Health and Safety, Human Resources (Integrated Workplace Health Management). Her current publications are *Disability Management: Theory, Strategy and Industry Practice 6th ed.*, *Occupational Health & Safety: Theory, Strategy and Industry Practice 3rd ed.*, and *A Practical Guide to Psychological Health & Safety in the Workplace*. Dianne also teaches the Integrated Disability Management Programs at the University of Fredericton.

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