

The Age Structure of Occupational Therapists Working in Ontario

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Background

Aging health care workers are contributing to the systemic health human resources challenges. Previous studies have focused on the age structure of physicians and nurses and the potential ramifications in regard to future supply and demand estimates. This study examines and analyzes the age structure of occupational therapists (OTs) practicing in Ontario.

Occupational therapists are one of the 24 regulated health professions in Ontario. They provide services and technologies to overcome barriers, and enable people to participate in the occupations which give meaning and purpose to their lives. OT services are delivered in a variety of settings.

Research Goal

To determine sub-markets of OTs related to age groups, with an emphasis on the age of OTs who are entering and leaving the profession. A determination of the age of OTs who are entering, leaving and staying in the profession will help to inform recruitment and retention efforts.

Methods

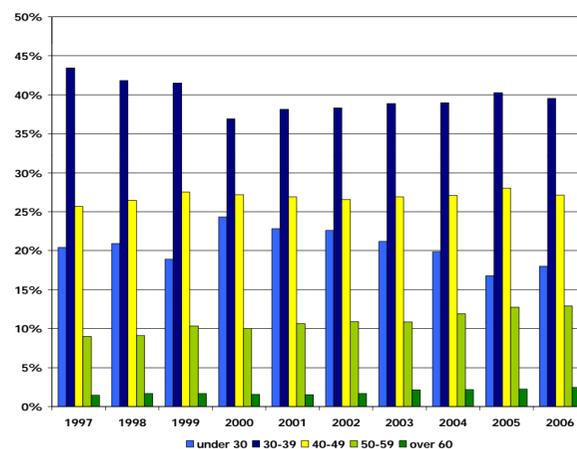
OTs are required to register annually with the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario (COTO). COTO data for 1997-2006 were merged on a unique registration number. The analysis was conducted on this retrospective longitudinal database. The analysis was based on 6563 OTs. Trends were analyzed over time for the age distribution of OTs practicing in Ontario, and the age distribution of OTs who were recruited to the profession and OTs who ceased professional practice in Ontario.

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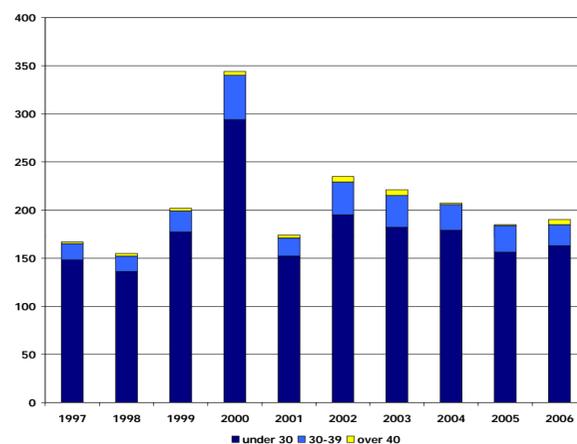
Results

Figure 1: Age Distribution of OTs Practicing in Ontario, 1997-2006



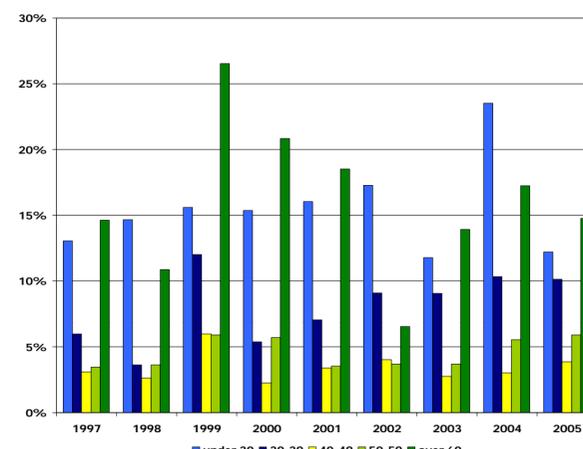
Over time, the proportion of OTs who were in the youngest age groups decreased, and the proportion of OTs over the age of 50 years increased. The average age of OTs increased from 37.1 years in 1997 to 38.8 years in 2006.

Figure 3: Number of New Graduates by Age Group, 1997-2006



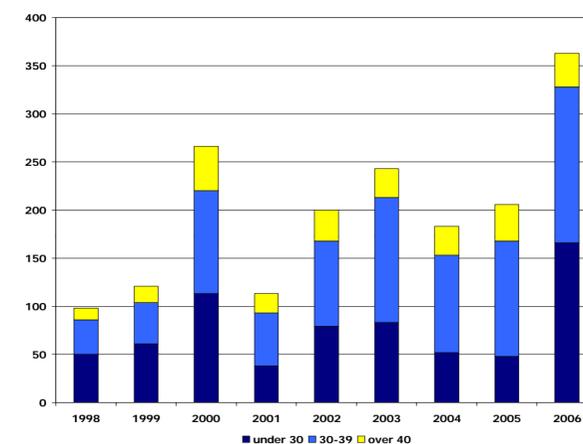
New graduates represent, on average, 53.1% of the OTs who were new to the database. The majority of this segment are young, that is from the under 30 age group (85.9%). Recent graduates account for 24.9% of OTs under 30 years of age.

Figure 2: Proportion of Each Age Group to Leave the Profession



Attrition is highest in the oldest and youngest age groups. On average, 41.3% of OTs who leave are under 30 and 38.2% are between the ages of 30 and 39 years.

Figure 4: Number of OTs Recruited by Age Group, 1998-2006



During this time period, the number of recruited OTs has increased from 98 to 363. Recruited OTs are older than new graduates; a large proportion (46.7%) of recruited OTs are in their thirties, and 15.0% are over 40, compared to 1.6% of new graduates.

Figure 5: Retention Rate By Age Group

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Avg
<30	86.9%	85.3%	84.4%	84.6%	84.0%	82.7%	88.2%	76.5%	87.8%	84.5%
30-39	94.0%	96.4%	88.0%	94.6%	92.9%	90.9%	91.0%	89.7%	89.9%	91.9%
40-49	96.9%	97.4%	94.0%	97.8%	96.6%	96.0%	97.2%	97.0%	96.2%	96.6%
50-59	96.5%	96.4%	94.1%	94.3%	96.5%	96.3%	96.3%	94.5%	94.1%	95.4%
>60	85.4%	89.1%	73.5%	79.2%	81.5%	93.4%	86.1%	82.8%	85.2%	84.0%

Retention rates are highest among OTs in their forties (96.6%) and fifties (95.4%), and lowest among OTs over 60 (84.0%) and under 30 (84.5%). These rates have remained relatively steady for most age groups with the exception of the over 60 age group. For this group, the rate of retention has varied from 73.5% in 1999-2000 to 93.4% in 2002-2003.

Conclusions

Proportionally, the youngest age group is shrinking. This may be due to changing entry-level requirements, i.e. the shift from bachelors degrees to master's degrees, increasing the number of years OTs are in school, and to the lower retention rate in this group.

The proportion of OTs over 50 is increasing. This can be seen in the expansion of both the 50-59 age group (by 127%) and the over 60 age group (by 148%). This expansion is largely due to the retention of older workers. Few new graduates or recruits can be found in these age groups.

Further research is needed to determine why so many young OTs are leaving the profession. Is it due to disillusionment, burnout or leaving the province; or are they temporarily leaving and intend to return, e.g., to raise a family?

The next stages of investigation will apply the tools of labour economics to analyze the 'survival' of OTs in the profession, and how it varies by age group, sector, gender, employment status, number of employers, and position.