

## Should Scottish Occupational Therapists Engage in the End of Life Debate?

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Throughout 2010 the end of life debate within Scotland became increasingly prominent due to initial proposals within the Scottish Parliament to introduce legislation that would legalise assisted suicide within Scotland. In order to consider the impact these proposals may have on occupational therapy practice, Michael Matheson MSP for Falkirk West, and former Queen Margaret University occupational therapy graduate, was invited to speak to the Level 4 students of the BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy degree course at Queen Margaret University. This curriculum work surrounding the end of life debate within Scotland was part of a 20 credit compulsory module for Level 4 students entitled 'Contemporary Issues in Occupational Therapy', which seeks to engage students in the evaluation and critical discussion of current health and social care policy and its impact on practice. The contribution of students within this module is assessed through the critical debate of current issues underpinned by policy, research and theory.

The End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill (ELAS) (Scottish Parliament, 2010) was proposed to allow lawful assistance to be provided in the facilitation or administration of an appropriate means, to end an individual's life with dignity and minimal distress. It outlined the potential for an individual over the age of 16 to be provided with lethal drugs for self or physician administration. In December 2010 the ELAS bill was rejected at the first stage by the Scottish Parliament, however, there are strong indications that following the Scottish elections that took place in May 2011, a reviewed ELAS bill will potentially be brought back to the Scottish Parliament again.

In preparation for the discussion with Mr Matheson MSP, students were asked to read the ELAS bill and post questions concerning the bill on the module web page. Questions were then selected and addressed by Michael Matheson during his discussion with students. As a result of his occupational therapy training Mr Matheson was able to provide an insight into the overlap between occupational therapy and politics and was invited to share his knowledge and experience with the students. Having been part of the committee discussing the ELAS bill he relayed his position in the debate. His view indicated that instead of producing legislation that legalised assisted suicide, Scotland instead should further develop and be more supportive of services within palliative and hospice care. He also voiced his view that Scotland should continue to be a global role model in palliative care service provision.

Online discussion following the question and answer debate with Mr Matheson appeared to indicate that students had anticipated that he would be in favour of the proposed bill. Students voiced the view that adherence to client-centred practice within the profession of occupational therapy might indicate that, as a profession, we should be advocates for patient choice, even in the challenging circumstances of discussing an individual's choice to end their life. It was also felt by the students, however, that a strict adherence to client-centred practice and advocating patient choice could also lead to moral dilemmas for practicing occupational therapists. These may include personal beliefs surrounding end of life assistance, professional responsibilities associated with the potential for coercion or perceived coercion, and whether Scottish occupational therapy education currently equips students to deal with end of life discussion with patients. Overall reflections from students via online discussion boards were very positive stating what an 'eye opening', 'politically motivating', 'inspiring', 'thought provoking' and 'empowering' experience the interview with Mr Matheson provided.

Essentially what this session appeared to highlight for students was the need for the profession of occupational therapy to engage with politics and in particular, policy developments within Scotland, such as the ELAS bill. Ensuring professional views are taken into account when developing policy was seen as essential by the students, especially when the policy is likely to impact on occupational therapy practice. This view contrasts somewhat with that of Barbara & Whiteford (2005), who has suggested that many occupational therapists see the profession as apolitical despite practice opportunities and constraints being defined by politics. Skolnik (2008) and Pollard et al (2009) point out that occupational therapy provides rounded education that takes into account many determinants of health including cultural, social and individual perceptions as well as environmental and biological factors. Through the use of this knowledge, McKee (2006) highlights the need for occupational therapy to speak up for our profession and the individuals we work with, to influence the creation of health initiatives and policy that could be successfully implemented. Julie Scott, chief executive of COT (2010), articulated that occupational therapy needs political support to work effectively, but we more importantly need to raise our profile and engage in politics to make ourselves invaluable to policy makers.

During his discussion with students at Queen Margaret University, Michael Matheson underlined the need for occupational therapy to become much more engaged with politics. He made it clear that he felt the people who are affected by the Bills and policies going through the Scottish Parliament should be well represented and have the opportunity to partake in the development of these changes. COT support this view, stating: "*The framework within which occupational therapists work is directly affected by political decision making at national and local level. It is essential that decision makers understand the benefits of occupational therapy for service users and budget holders*" (COT, 2011). The ELAS bill is just one of many policy

developments within Scotland that will, or has the potential to be, significant in the way in which occupational therapists will practice in the future.

For more information on the ELAS bill visit: [www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/bills/38-EndLifeAssist/](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/bills/38-EndLifeAssist/)

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