

## **Current Hand Therapy Practice in Israel**

### **By Deborah A. Schwartz**

I met recently with Israeli Occupational Therapists at Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem, Israel, to share information on current Israeli hand therapy practice. My contact was made through Shelley Marcus, M.Sc. OTR, and Director of Hand Therapy Services at Shaare Zedek Medical Center. I asked the attendees to answer a survey on the scope of their hand therapy experiences and practice methods. The results of the survey reveal similarities and differences among hand therapy practice in Israel compared to hand therapy practice in the United States. The attendees participating in the survey live in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Petach Tikva, Ramat Gan and Modi'in.

### **Occupational Therapy in Israel**

Nearly all of the respondents to the survey were Occupational Therapists with 5- 15 years or more of hand experience. Graduates of Israeli Occupational Therapy programs complete 3 and ½ years of study for a bachelor's degree. There is no official hand therapy certification in Israel, although several therapists indicated that they have completed special advanced courses in hand therapy topics. All of the Occupational Therapists are members of the Israel Occupational Therapy Association. Israel also has a Society of Hand Therapy, with about 100-150 members, and is a member of the International Federation of Societies of Hand Therapy. In fact, the first gathering of the International Federation of Societies of Hand Therapy was held in Tel Aviv, Israel in 1989.

### **National Health System**

Israel has a National Health Insurance Law which guarantees that everyone is entitled to medical care. The majority of the country's hospitals are owned and managed by the government. Israeli therapists treating hands work in the out-patient and/ or in-patient departments of hospitals, or in National Health Service hand clinics. Medical services are supplied by the country's four comprehensive health insurance plans, which also may operate specialized rehabilitation clinics. Israeli citizens may select their individual insurance plan, which entitles them to a wide array of medical services.

### **Hand Therapy Treatment**

Patients receiving hand therapy are likely to be seen 2-3 times per week for 30-45 minute treatments. Therapists on average see 8-10 patients a day and make roughly 5 splints a week. Interestingly, most therapists work part time, between 20- 30 hours per week. Common thermoplastic materials available in Israel include Orthoplast, Hexalite, Orfit, Turbocast, and Aquaplast. The most commonly treated hand injuries include flexor and extensor tendon lacerations, trauma, fractures, burns, osteoarthritis and carpal tunnel syndrome. Paraffin was the most commonly utilized modality in the treatment programs, according to this group of therapists. Occupational therapists also use cold packs, contrast baths and TENS when appropriate.

The Israeli therapists were up to date on many of the evaluation tools in use in American hand therapy clinics, such as the Jebsen, the Functional Dexterity Test (FDT) and the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM). Several therapists expressed interest in the Patient Rated Wrist Evaluation (PRWE) which is in the process of being translated into Hebrew.

### **Continuing Education**

Israeli therapists report that they attend local conferences or workshops 1-2 times per year, read the Journal of Hand Therapy for the latest updates and trends in hand therapy protocols, and discuss patient care and treatment regularly with their respective therapy departments. Most therapists feel that while their friends understand and respect their profession, the majority of the public does not know what it is they do. They would like to improve working relations with physiotherapists and educate the greater community as to occupational therapy work in general and hand therapy specifically. More importantly, however, most therapists feel that the doctors and surgeons with whom they work appreciate their efforts and meet regularly with them to discuss patient care and protocols.

### **Concerns Facing the Profession**

Israeli and American hand therapists share similar concerns regarding their profession. Limited funding for new and advanced equipment, lack of evidence-based hand therapy research studies and limited funds for staffing head this list. The therapists in Israel also face the challenges of patient compliance and vast cultural differences among patient populations as Israel struggles not only with political issues but also with the absorption of over a million new immigrants during the last ten years. The Israeli therapists were more reluctant to share personal information such as difficulties they may face in their individual work places or their favorite diagnoses.

### **Importance of International Relations**

The survey results reveal a dedicated and motivated group of individuals interesting in furthering their education. Israeli Occupational Therapists are eager to participate in local guest lectures and workshops. Several therapists mentioned that they have recently traveled to the United States to attend ASHT meetings, AOTA meetings and the Philadelphia Hand Meetings. It is extremely significant and advantageous for therapists worldwide to make these international connections. The opportunity to share ideas and treatment protocols will ultimately benefit all therapists and their patients everywhere. Therapists who are traveling abroad are encouraged to seek out the local Occupational Therapy community for clinic visiting, and /or possible guest lecturing. Their efforts will be greatly appreciated and enhance our profession as well as demonstrate our commitment to improving health care concerns in our world.

## **Biography of Author**

Deborah A. Schwartz has been an Occupational Therapist for 21 years, specializing in hand therapy for 18 years. Her specialty is working with tendon transfer patients. In 2004, she presented two talks on Tendon Transfer Rehabilitation at the International Federation of Societies of Hand Therapy conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. She has also presented on this topic at the Philadelphia Hand Meeting and at the ASHT meeting in Charlotte, NC in 2005. Her article, "Tendon Transfers for Enhanced Wrist Extension: A Case Report" was recently published in the British Journal of Hand Therapy. Ms. Schwartz is the 2004 recipient of the Evelyn Mackin Traveling Hand Therapist Award. She traveled to Norway and Great Britain where she visited hand therapy clinics and presented on tendon transfers and hand therapy in America. An article about her experiences will be published in an upcoming Journal of Hand Therapy.

Ms. Schwartz makes regular visits to Israel, and loves meeting hand therapists from around the world. Ms. Schwartz currently works at a private hand center in Marlton, New Jersey. For more information, please contact her at [debschwar@comcast.net](mailto:debschwar@comcast.net).