

THE APPLICATION OF CLINICAL REASONING SKILLS

DEFINITION

Traditionally, *clinical reasoning* has been considered to be the application of theory to practice. It is a process in which previously acquired learning of principles and concepts are generalized and applied to a new situation in order to predict the likely outcome and to consider possible means of resolving the presenting problem based on professional knowledge. As a preliminary step the problem is identified and clarified by following the first eight steps of the PBL process listed on page 5:

Following the acquisition of knowledge relevant to the situation, *clinical judgement* is needed to:

1. Generate possible strategies to solve the problem,
2. Select a particular strategy,
3. Implement the strategy,
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy in conjunction with a reassessment of the continued presence of the problem,
5. Take corrective action as needed. (Bair & Gray, 1985)

Clinical judgement in occupational therapy practice involves a model of clinical reasoning that "is interpretive, or meaning-centered, ... focuses on how patients make sense of their disability and its meaning for their individual lives" (Mattingly, 1991). It is directed towards action appropriate for the particular client at that particular time and circumstance. Contrary to theory which suggests general truths, clinically reasoned action occurs in a unique context and often requires reconsideration and adjustment to meet the particular needs of the client. This model of clinical reasoning is covered in depth in Unit 1 of the occupational therapy programme.

RATIONALE

The development of skills in critical thinking, clinical reasoning and appraisal of evidence is crucial in problem-based learning because these skills are essential for the rigorous analysis and interpretation of research, clinical observation, appraisal of literature and appreciation of epidemiology and biostatistics.

Health professionals are trained to solve problems. Problem-based, self-directed learning provides students with an opportunity to solve and manage problems. In the initial stages, however, the emphasis is on problem-based learning, problem solving being gradually stressed as the student progresses through the Programme. The probing of health care problems allows the student to identify the practical skills necessary for the management of those problems, to access appropriate resources and practise these skills.