

Embracing The Past – Part 16
The 70's, To Meet the Need 3

The Document “Quota in Occupational Therapy for 1975” was presented by Miss Jennifer Line, Reader in Occupational Therapy to the Meeting of the Board of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Queensland, on May 29, 1974. The proposal was accepted and the quota set at 60 into the first year with the possibility of it being raised or changed to a second year quota in a couple of years time.

As previously mentioned there were 60 enrolled in 1974 and there were 126 positions with about 40 of these vacant. By the time they graduated mid year in 1977 (a three year three month course was to increase to a seven semester course) the previous vacancies had had the potential to be filled by the 47 who had graduated in 1974/75/76 but of course it did not happen quite as simply as that. The positions in Queensland had by now increased to 149 and with the larger influx of graduates the vacancy rate was reduced to about 10%.

It should not be forgotten that we did not rely purely on Australian trained therapists. In 1972 we had seven therapists trained overseas while in 1977 this number had increased to 14 and we were very grateful to them for bringing a breadth of knowledge and experience to the profession. It was also helpful to know others were having similar problems. A survey in Scotland in 1975 of the NHS and other employers showed a vacancy rate of 25% to 34%. The British NHS had a ratio of only 3.5 therapists to a population of 100,000. They were very concerned that in some Psychiatric Institutions services were called “Occupational Therapy” with no qualified therapists employed or one to a support staff of sixty! Some of this sounds familiar!

The Australian Association of Occupational Therapists undertook a Labour Force Survey in 1981. The results gave an overall Australian ratio of 1.1 therapists to a population of 10,000. The individual State ratios were, New South Wales 0.9, Victoria 1.4, Queensland 1.0, South Australia 0.6, Western Australia 1.7, Tasmania 1.0, Australian Capital Territory 0.9, and Northern Territory 0.5. By 1983 the number of positions in Queensland had increased to 290 and the vacancy rate was about 12%. Several factors led to the slower rate of increase. Of course the main one was the Government running out of money; requested positions were rationed; positions unfilled at the end of the financial year were frozen (our students would graduate just after this happened!) and employers were instructed to cut staff by a particular percentage by not replacing staff who resigned. This could mean an one hundred percent loss of a service if it was the one OT who resigned from a Community Health team! However there was an increase over time if a little more slowly than predicted,