Orthotist/Prosthetist Occupation Summary

What is an orthotist/prosthetist?

Orthotist/prosthetists (pron. or-tho-tist/pros-the-tist) are tertiary qualified Allied Health Practitioners who specialise in the assessment, provision and ongoing review of orthoses (supportive braces) and prostheses (artificial limbs). The role of the orthotist/prosthetist is to promote quality of life through a client-centered approach to the provision of orthotic and prosthetic treatment. In Australia, orthotist/prosthetists are trained in both disciplines of orthotics and prosthetics, at either a Bachelor or Masters level. Orthotist/prosthetists may practice in both or only one of these disciplines. Orthotist/prosthetists work autonomously and as an integral member of the multidisciplinary team.

What does an orthotist/prosthetist do?

Orthotist/prosthetists are trained to assess and treat the physical and functional limitations of people resulting from illnesses and disabilities including limb amputations using orthoses and prostheses. This involves clinical assessment, provision of an orthosis or prosthesis, and ongoing clinical support including education, therapy and maintenance of the orthosis or prosthesis.

What is an orthosis?

An orthosis (pl. orthoses) is the correct term for an externally applied device that is designed and fitted to the body to achieve one or more of the following goals:

- Correct alignment of a limb which is ill-positioned due to spasticity or flaccidity
- Accommodate a deformity in order to support function and minimize discomfort
- Protect and support a body part after injury or surgery (such as fracture, spinal injury, ligament or muscle tears)
- Reduce pain, such as that associated with arthritis
- Re-distribute pressure, for example, to reduce the likelihood of foot ulcers and amputation in people with diabetes related peripheral vascular disease
- Use pressure to correct deformity such as in plagiocephaly or scoliosis
- Assist rehabilitation, increase mobility and improve independence, for example by improving walking and balance after stroke, acquired brain injury or spinal injury.

Orthoses (often referred to as splints or braces) are best described by the anatomical body part over which they are acting, in line with International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) terminology. Commonly prescribed orthoses include:

- Foot Orthoses (FOs), Ankle Orthoses (AOs), Knee Orthoses (KOs)
- Ankle-Foot Orthoses (AFOs) and Knee-Ankle-Foot Orthoses (KAFOs)
- Various upper-limb orthoses for the finger, hand, wrist, elbow and shoulder
- Cranial, spinal and abdominal orthoses

Orthotist/prosthetists are trained to provide orthoses for the entire body, which includes a wide variety of prefabricated and custom-made orthoses. Other health professionals may also fit a limited range of prefabricated orthoses, or custom-made orthoses for certain body parts however only orthotist/prosthetists are qualified to clinically assess, provide the orthosis and supply the ongoing clinical management relating to orthoses for the entire body.
What is a prosthesis?

A prosthesis (pl. prostheses) is an artificial device attached or applied to the body to replace a missing part. The purpose of a prosthesis is to restore function and/or improve appearance (cosmesis). Orthotist/prosthetists are qualified to perform the clinical assessment, provision and ongoing clinical support for the full range of external prostheses.

What clients do orthotist/prosthetists treat?

Orthotist/prosthetists treat a wide variety of clients across the lifespan. Examples include:

- Infants with developmental dysplasia of the hip (DDH)
- Children with plagiocephaly or brachycephaly
- Children and adults with limb-loss
- Persons of all ages with physical disabilities and neuromuscular conditions, including cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy
- Persons with a range of injuries, including sporting injuries
- Adolescents with scoliosis
- Persons of all ages requiring foot orthoses, including those with diabetes and arthritis
- Persons with spinal injuries

Where do orthotist/prosthetists work?

Orthotist/prosthetists work within public and private hospital settings, community based organisations, aged care facilities and the private health sector. Services are delivered within the primary, secondary and tertiary care sectors and a number of practitioners also work in academia and research areas in major tertiary hospitals and universities. Within the clinical setting an orthotist/prosthetist is an autonomous member of the allied health team and will be found within the allied health and rehabilitation departments of major hospitals.

Disclaimer – This fact sheet does not replace clinical advice. If you require orthotic/prosthetic services AOPA recommend speaking to your practitioner.