Practice guidelines define the best and most effective practice for a particular condition, care group or circumstances. Guidelines are not rigid statements, but are recommendations based on the best available evidence and knowledge, or a consensus of expert opinion (COT 2011, p3).

Guidelines are a way to support effective practice and they have some key functions:

- To provide guidance to professionals and service users to make appropriate decisions about the health and/or social care provided.
- To describe the most appropriate care or action to be taken, based upon evidence, published knowledge and/or expert consensus opinion, allowing for reasonable variations in practice.
- To focus on specific conditions or circumstances, whilst taking account of other influences on health and social care, e.g. organisational or environmental factors or local community characteristics.
- As a means to assess and improve the quality of a service provision through the process of auditing the service against the guideline recommendations.

(COT 2011, p3-4)

Evidence-based guidelines are produced as a result of a clearly defined practice question; a comprehensive search for the current evidence, robust critical appraisal of that evidence; and its subsequent synthesis to produce recommendations for practice.

As a practitioner it can be more practical and reliable to focus on evidence where there has been a systematic approach to its development, such as an evidence based guideline. Guidelines can provide good quality robust evidence and a knowledge base which is current, to inform your practice.

Practice guidelines should be used in conjunction with the current versions of the Professional standards for occupational therapy practice (COT 2011) and also the Code of ethics and professional conduct (COT 2010).

Practice or clinical guidelines, are published by a number of organisations.

There are occupational therapy specific guidelines, such as those published by the College of Occupational Therapists. You can access the current guidelines available at: http://www.cot.co.uk/practice-guidelines/cot-practice-guidelines.
In the United Kingdom, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, and the Scottish Intercollegiate Guideline Network, produce national guidelines on a wide range of areas related to health and social care.


Q: What makes the College of Occupational Therapists’ guidelines a reliable source of evidence?

A: NICE has accredited the process used by the College of Occupational Therapists to produce its practice guidelines. Accreditation is valid for five years from January 2013 and is applicable to guidance produced using the processes described in the Practice guidelines development manual 2nd edition (2011). More information on accreditation can be viewed at http://www.nice.org.uk/accreditation.

This means that the College’s guideline development process, and therefore the products developed using that process, have met 25 rigorous criteria, and can be relied upon to be robust, unbiased and of high quality.

Practice guidelines which have been published in or since 2012 are eligible to display the NICE Accreditation Mark.


Q: How can I use a COT practice guideline to inform my day to day work?

A: The College of Occupational Therapists’ Practice, Research and Development, and Education and Learning groups have developed resources to support practitioners taking guideline recommendations from theory into practice.

Three practical tools are available for practice guidelines (published by the College since 2011), to facilitate:

• Awareness and understanding (a continuing professional development session which includes a session outline, notes and a PowerPoint presentation);
• Audit (a tool to evaluate recommendations); and
• Application (a Quick Reference Guide).

These tools, which can be adapted for local use, are available from the COT website at the same time as a new guideline product is released.

Q: Who can I contact for further information about COT practice guidelines?

A: You can contact the Quality Programme Manager at COT.