

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
December 20, 2005

CONTACT: Rob Black  
301-652-6611 x 2963  
cell: (202) 288-3702  
[praota@aota.org](mailto:praota@aota.org)

**Note to Reporters: This is an opinion column by the AOTA President.**  
**If you would like to publish this column or conduct an interview, please**  
**contact the AOTA press office.**

## **AGING IS A FAMILY OCCUPATION – DR. CAROLYN BAUM**

As the White House Conference on Aging convened this week in Washington, DC, delegates were faced with a stark reality: The American population is aging rapidly. The policy challenges they discussed are critical and difficult. No one knows that better than American families. They are faced with the daily effects of aging parents and relatives. Yet many people tend to see only the problems caused by aging and overlook the opportunities. There may be constant changes as we age, but many of those changes can be managed, limited, and compensated for.

The family is the first and best line of support in addressing aging issues. Supports and programs are needed but they must be managed for individuals—usually by family members. Consider how many people are now analyzing the Medicare prescription drug plan options for their parents. As families across the nation gather together during this holiday season, many will take the opportunity to evaluate the needs of aging relatives and talk about plans for the future. Everything from “where should Dad live?” to “will Mom’s medications be covered by this Medicare plan?” to “how can we keep Aunt Kay from falling again?” will be up for discussion.

As an occupational therapist, I believe that these conversations don’t have to be negative, resulting in hurt feelings or restricted lifestyles. On the contrary, this can be a positive time when families come together and use the information from recent research to ensure that their aging loved ones continue to enjoy life and make valuable contributions to the family and the community.

Occupational therapy and other disciplines have studied rehabilitation and neuroscience to provide a scientific perspective on aging. Participation in the everyday tasks of life is fundamental to human development, sustenance, and vitality. A lack of participation leads to physical deterioration, cognitive decline, and social isolation, while also lessening the ability to perform competently in daily life.

To ensure that seniors keep participating in daily tasks and pursuing interests they enjoy, we must use an approach that is enabling rather than restraining. In other words, how do we keep seniors doing the tasks that give meaning to their lives? First, we must start by assessing seniors’ needs in their current situation. Too often the assumption is made that assisted living is necessary, rather than looking at what factors can be changed in a

senior's environment to maintain his or her abilities and independence. According to an AARP survey, 89% of retired Americans prefer to remain in their current residences as long as possible. So why not try to modify the environment first?

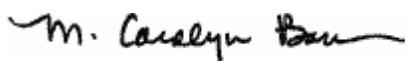
For example, severe injuries from a fall are a common concern for both seniors and their families. But there are strategies to reduce falls in older adults. Physical exercise and other interventions can improve balance, strength, and flexibility. In addition, homes can be modified to reduce falling hazards by installing grab bars, improving lighting, and removing clutter that may cause tripping. Medications should be reviewed twice a year to assess dosages and side effects that may increase the likelihood of falling. Fear of falling, usually after a fall, is often the most serious inhibitor. But this too can be addressed by talking openly and making specific changes that empower an older person to feel safer.

Driving is another task that affects seniors' participation in everyday life. There are certainly physical, mental, and sensory limitations that can make driving unsafe. However, there are environmental factors such as the type of car, the positioning of the seat, and special equipment that can safely extend a senior driver's time behind the wheel.

The latest White House Conference on Aging comes at a time when health care is the second largest item in the federal budget and health care spending is growing faster than the overall rate of inflation. Adults over the age of 65 make up 12% of the population yet account for more than 36% of health care expenditures.

Proactive measures to tackle seniors' personal, environmental, and occupational challenges will build a healthier senior population that costs the American public less money. This is the best gift we can give our seniors this holiday season—enabling them to lead their lives to the fullest.

For more specific tips, see the article "[Suggestions for Families Dealing With Aging Issues.](#)"



Dr. Carolyn Baum, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA  
President, American Occupational Therapy Association

### **[AOTA President Participates in National Radio Tour](#)**

**The American Occupational Therapy Association**, established in 1917, represents nearly 40,000 members. AOTA is an active advocate for the profession, and for individuals who can benefit from occupational therapy services.