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Predicting occupational competence in persons with dementia: Considering dimensions of cognitive competence

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Introduction: A key occupationally related consequence of dementing illnesses is its effect on a person's ability to competently complete the range of everyday activities or occupations necessary for safe, independent living. Within dementia care in Canada, the role of occupational therapy often includes predicting occupational competence, defined as the capacity of persons with dementia to perform such occupations competently and to derive meaning from them. Although occupational therapists often draw on pre-existing standardized measures of cognition to predict occupational competence in the context of community living, it is challenging to extrapolate possible problems from cognitive testing alone.

Objectives: This presentation addresses a potential way forward in enhancing the capacity of occupational therapists to use the measurement of cognitive competence to predict the occupational competence of persons with dementia.

Description: Everyday life involves both routine, frequently repeated actions and a variety of novel situations. Everyday cognition is the study of cognitive function in an everyday context. To understand everyday cognition there is a need to identify factors that contribute to the performance of everyday tasks that have predictive ability and ecological validity by drawing on concepts found in the psychology literature on everyday cognition.

Discussion: The everyday cognition literature provides empirical and conceptual work of great relevance to occupational therapy and the understanding of occupation, and points to the need to broaden the dimensions of cognitive competence that are assessed when predicting the occupational competence of persons with dementia.

Conclusion: Merging work of everyday cognition with that of occupational therapists and scientists on the complexity of occupation provides a promising way forward in dementia care.

Contribution to the practice of occupational therapy: Occupational therapists have a key contribution in dementia care by examining a person's cognition within the context of their daily life occupations in order to predict occupational competence. Further understanding and development of methods to assess the dimensions of cognitive competence that link with occupational competence will enhance the evidence base for this contribution.