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Occupational Therapy Influencing the Acute Care of the Confused Elderly

Kate Read

Flinders Medical Centre, South Australia, Australia

Behavioural disturbance in older people with dementia and delirium is a growing challenge in the aged care sector. Behavioural disturbance is a common reason for presentation to the acute care sector, and this presents many health care challenges. These include the difficulties of providing care in an inappropriate environment, the need for one on one nursing for these patients, lengthy hospital admissions, and risks to both patients and staff. There is a growing body of evidence about how these challenges are best addressed, and it is argued that Occupational Therapy has much to contribute to a) the planning of appropriate care environments, b) mental state and functional assessment, and c) in the provision of therapeutic intervention for this vulnerable patient population. This paper will outline how Occupational Therapy has influenced change in the assessment and management of this patient population in an Australian acute care setting. This has involved the development of Occupational Therapy assessment processes to increase the rate of detection of delirium, the development of Occupational Therapy clinical pathways for confused elderly patients with behavioural disturbance, assisting in the design of an appropriate care environment, the assessment of patients' needs in terms of sensory stimulation, and the provision of multi-sensory therapy. In addition, the broader issue of Occupational Therapy's ability to influence change within the health care setting will be discussed.