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Cancer Survivorship and resuming occupations - Rehabilitation: are we doing enough?

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Introduction

Improvements in cancer treatment and care have resulted in increased 5-10 year survival rates. There is evidence in the literature that survivors of cancer treatment experience a long term impact upon their every day lives due to fatigue, physical, neurological, cognitive and psychosocial impairments. There are few examples of targeted rehabilitation programs aimed at meeting the specific rehabilitation needs of cancer survivors.

Objectives

To explore some of the rehabilitation needs for survivors of radical cancer treatment and to describe an occupational therapy approach for longstanding cancer related fatigue (CRF).

Methods

A qualitative investigation into the functional rehabilitation needs of survivors of haematological cancer included multiple sources of data from literature review, in-depth interviews, Australian and International Government Policies. A case study of occupational therapy intervention with a woman who had persistent CRF that affected job performance and quality of life one year after completion of cancer treatment. Interventions, progress, outcome measure and therapist time required will be described.

Results

The needs assessment concluded that cancer survivors require a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach to rehabilitation in the long term to treat their physical and cognitive impairments and optimise their every day function. The woman succeeded in her goal of returning to full-time work. She valued the support, encouragement and advocacy of occupational therapy that is rarely available for cancer survivors in the current public healthcare setting in Australia.

Conclusion

Survivors of radical treatment have a range of rehabilitation needs and focused occupational therapy interventions can improve participation. More resources need to be directed to research and treatment in this area to improve participation and productivity domains of ICF.

Contribution to the practice/evidence of occupational therapy

The qualitative research provides a background for therapists treating people with long standing limitations following cancer treatment. 'My fatigue scale', a novel individualised measure, was integral to self-monitoring and behaviour modification and would be of interest to others working with late effects. The successful fatigue intervention gives encouragement for late interventions.