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Occupational Therapy students' attitudes towards older people: A longitudinal study.

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Introduction: There is suggestion in health literature that healthcare students have negative attitudes towards working with older people. This is of significance as the ageing population, prevalent in many countries, is likely to result in an increased demand on health professionals, including occupational therapists, to work with and provide quality care for older patients. Negative attitudes towards ageing can be a substantial obstacle to the delivery of high quality health care to older adults.

Objectives: This study examined the attitudes of occupational therapy students towards older people throughout their four year undergraduate training. In addition, the study explored whether particular components of the occupational therapy course influenced students attitudes to older people.

Methods: Students enrolled in Occupational Therapy at the University of Western Sydney were surveyed at the commencement of their degree, at the end of third year and after completing the subject which specifically addresses working with older people. The survey used the Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale to measure students' attitudes. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences computer software.

Results: Sixty students were involved in the study which was conducted between 2007 and 2010. This presentation will discuss the key findings of the study and make comment on whether aspects of occupational therapy curriculum contributed to the formation of students' attitudes towards older people.

Conclusion: Attitudes towards older people influences the health care they receive. Study findings will provide educators with information about the attitudes occupational therapy students hold towards older people and how occupational therapy curriculum shapes these attitudes.

Contribution to occupational therapy: Occupational therapists play an important role in the provision of health care services to older people. To ensure graduates provide high quality care in this area of practice, students need to develop realistic attitudes towards the ageing process and older people. Understanding students' attitudes towards older people allows occupational therapy educators to review occupational therapy curriculum and develop education strategies to ensure that students graduate with an accurate understanding of the ageing process and the needs of older people.