0790

Loosen Up: Updating the Role of Occupational Therapy Interventions in Patients with Scleroderma Post-Stem Cell Transplant

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Scleroderma, or systemic sclerosis, is an autoimmune disease of the connective tissue, characterized by the formation of scar tissue in the skin and organs of the body (http://www.scleroderma.org/medical/overview.shtm) In nearly all cases of scleroderma, skin thickening begins in the hands and fingers, impacting the everyday occupations of the individual. In cases where the scar tissue invades the kidneys and lungs, a patient's quality of life is further affected. Although still being researched for this population, stem cell transplantation is emerging as a hopeful therapy with encouraging results (Tyndall and Furst, 2007).

The authors aim to have participants: 1) identify challenges affecting individuals with scleroderma, 2) gain an understanding of potential benefits of early interventions after stem cell transplant to assist the patient to renew or revisit occupation, and 3) partner with scientists researching scleroderma to provide recommendations for future occupational therapy treatment.

The role of the occupational therapist involves addressing the physical and psychosocial needs of the patient as they are faced with this disease and treatment. Interventions include maintaining and increasing the potential for hand function, as well as addressing the systemic issues that affect the performance of activities of daily living. Research has indicated that some individuals with scleroderma perceive their functional status, especially in the areas of occupation, leisure, activity tolerance and pain control, as diminished (Sandqvist et al., 2004).

As stem cell transplant evolves into a potential treatment option for some patients with scleroderma, oppotunites exist for occupational therapists to play a vital role in the treatment team. The presenters will address the benefits and challenges of providing occupational therapy interventions immediately after stem cell transplant, as well as explore the role occupational therapists play on the team of scientists researching future scleroderma treatments.

In a 1.5 hour workshop, the presenters intend to use lecture, interactive case studies and open discussion to address the objectives. Up to 100 participants can benefit from the presenters' teaching methods for this topic.