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WHAT DO OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS WHO WORK IN AGED CARE NEED TO PROVIDE OPTIMAL SERVICE DELIVERY QUICKLY, SAFELY AND EFFECTIVELY?

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Introduction

When working within aged care services, occupational therapists struggle with the "difficult decisions" when providing optimal intervention with elderly patients and their families. This becomes more stressful when considering the pressures associated with shortened length of stay, increased throughput, increasing variety of discharge options and patients with more complexities.

Objectives

To describe what education and supervisory structures would assist occupational therapists working in aged care settings to be confident in providing optimal service delivery in a safe and timely manner.

Description:

Concern for how occupational therapists working in sub-acute care "managed" the "difficult clinical decisions" led to an exploratory study. This study was conducted in two phases.

Phase 1.

Fifteen occupational therapists working within a sub-acute aged care service during a 12 month period were asked to attend one of two focus groups exploring their perspectives on "difficult clinical decisions". Both groups identified complexities associated with cognitive decline and their own lack of confidence in work knowledge and experience as being problematic. A follow up questionnaire was administered to further explore issues of confidence in work practice, discharge pressures and supervisory structures.

Phase 2

Following phase 1, the author was interested to explore the similarities between the needs of occupational therapists working in acute and sub-acute aged care settings. In-depth interviews were conducted with occupational therapy staff at the acute hospital. These interviews explored questions around educational support and supervisory structures that would enhance confidence when making difficult clinical decisions. The results were analysed thematically.

Conclusions

Organisations should offer continuous and comprehensive educational programs, exposure to new learning opportunities with support, and collaborative teaching to encourage confident and independent decision making for occupational therapists working in aged care services across the continuum of care.

Contribution to the practice /evidence base of occupational therapy

This study, grounded in occupational therapy management practice, provides useful information for services about how best to support their staff when providing services to elderly patients. These results are valuable to occupational therapy services worldwide and could be modified to meet the needs of remote and sole clinicians which may also foster improved retention of staff.