

Promoting occupationally focused intervention for elderly people with complex care needs within an interdisciplinary team working in an acute assessment unit

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Introduction

Many acute hospital emergency departments are developing short stay units with interdisciplinary teams to assist in providing comprehensive care to elderly people with complex needs. Such units are likely to play an increasingly important role in health care delivery with the ageing of the world's population.

Objectives

This paper explores the experiences of occupational therapists in the development and implementation of interdisciplinary practice within an acute assessment unit (AAU) based in a large tertiary hospital in Melbourne, Australia. A conceptual model to guide service delivery will be briefly outlined.

Description/Report

The Alfred hospital implemented an interdisciplinary AAU in March 2009. The AAU aims to admit complex patients from the emergency department (ED) and formulate an integrated discharge plan within an 8-hour stay. Occupational therapists work as members of an interdisciplinary team that includes physiotherapists, social workers, and specialist medical and nursing staff. The unit aims to improve the timeliness of service delivery, reduce the number of extended stays in the ED, improve continuity of care, and minimise ED overcrowding.

Results/Discussion

Although this service is new and our analysis preliminary, several trends in service delivery are already apparent. Challenges associated with the rapid patient turn around and the time required to execute comprehensive discharge plans are particularly problematic given that the unit preferentially admits complex cases. For occupational therapists, maintaining a holistic approach to assessment and treatment that adequately considers the complex occupational needs of each individual admitted to the AAU is also an ongoing concern.

Conclusion

The model of interdisciplinary practice represents a significant conceptual shift from many long-established modes of service delivery, and the process of implementing this model of care needs to be carefully executed. Working within these systems, occupational therapists can help ensure a focus on occupation in an otherwise highly medicalised environment.

Contribution to the practice / evidence base of occupational therapy

Occupational therapists are increasingly working in interdisciplinary teams. This paper adds to the developing knowledge base in relation to best-practice implementation of acute care services to

complex elderly people, a population who is becoming increasingly important as the world's population ages.