

A Community Based Rehabilitation Approach to Promote Health of Elders in Nicaragua

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Introduction/Objective:

This presentation will demonstrate to Occupational Therapy (OT) educators and practitioners the merit of a multi-professional community based rehabilitation approach (CBR) to address wellness of an elder population. Elders are often an overlooked population in developing countries and in CBR literature. Through an innovative initiative in Nicaragua, the effectiveness of CBR to promote sustainable services for elders is demonstrated while addressing the positive impact on OT students' learning and education.

Description:

Yearly, Pacific University College of Health Professions sends a group of students and faculty from Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Dental Health, and Pharmacy to Nicaragua, aiming to create sustainable programming to improve healthcare for elders. This initiative began because of the extreme need for access to healthcare in Nicaragua. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere (UNDP, 2004). Over 50% of Nicaraguans age 60+ are unemployed and do not receive government pension—leaving elders without secure financial support (INEC, 2004). Many have been abandoned and live in public facilities with limited/no healthcare services. Through collaboration with local government, health providers, caregivers, and elders, a needs-assessment was completed, strategies for intervention identified, and implementation initiated in the community of Granada.

Results/Discussion:

Building social capital, using culturally compatible program planning, managing, monitoring, and evaluation are key components of CBR to create long-term public policy and community change. Since initiation of the program, health service for abandoned elders now includes regular health visits by a local gerontologist, bi-weekly access to physical therapy, the foundations of a dental clinic, and educational opportunities for caregivers. The Nicaraguan Ministry of Health supports development of a one-week rehabilitation course for local providers including introducing concepts of occupation to promote elder wellness in a country where OT does not exist. Students report increased understanding of alternative cultures, health disciplines, and community practice.

Conclusion/Contribution to Practice

The Nicaragua Project shows a positive trend that demonstrates that CBR is a viable model to promote health and wellness of elders in countries where elders may not be perceived as a priority population to health services, while additionally contributing to OT education to promote cultural sensitivity and program development skills.