

Performance Based Assessment of Inner City Elders with Dementia

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Background: Despite greater risk of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias low income minority elders are less likely to seek diagnosis and treatment for cognitive problems. The Memory and Aging Program Satellite provides home-based diagnosis and care management for minority and medically underserved elders. Traditional memory assessments such as the Short Blessed Scale or MMSE don't identify executive function deficits which limit ability to live independently..

Methods: Fifty two older adults referred for assessment were evaluated at home by an occupational therapist with the Executive Function Performance Test (EFPT). The EFPT is a performance-based assessment which records cognitive support needed to successfully complete the task. Tasks include cooking, medication management, bill paying and making a telephone call. All were also evaluated by a nurse trained to diagnose dementia using a clinical interview and standard memory assessments.

Results: A clinical dementia rating (CDR) was assigned for all participants; 15 were classified as very mild dementia, 29 with mild dementia and 9 with moderate dementia. Mean EFPT scores increased significantly ($p < .04$) by stage of AD. Bill paying was the most difficult task followed by cooking. Sequencing and organization were impaired in very mild dementia, while significant problems with judgment and safety were observed in participants with mild and moderate AD. Executive function deficits were also associated with impaired IADL scores.

Conclusions: Traditional brief cognitive screening methods lack ecological validity and fail to identify cognitive impairments in complex life tasks. Performance based assessment with the EFPT provides occupational therapists with information needed to develop treatment plans and recommendations regarding ability of elders to live in independent community settings. Performance based assessments also eliminate test bias effects of low socioeconomic status and low literacy.

Contribution to Occupational Therapy: OTs are often asked to determine whether older adults can continue to live in community settings. Brief cognitive assessments don't provide adequate information for such decisions particularly for elders with minimal education or low literacy. The EFPT provides information about the cognitive skills needed for complex life tasks essential for independence in community settings. The EFPT provides information for treatment planning, environmental support and caregiver education