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Enabling Health and Well-being in Old Age: A Cross-sectional Survey of the Role of Occupational Therapy in Care Homes in South Africa

Nicola Ann Plastow, Megan De La Bat, Cecile Michau, Janika Van Den Berg, Melindie Van Den Berg, Jone Vreken
Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa

Introduction: Although more than half of older people in South Africa live in extended family households (Census 2011), the need for residential care is likely to increase as the ageing population grows. Despite the value of occupational therapy, very few care homes employ an occupational therapist. Additionally, those who do work in this setting report low levels of support and a poorly defined role.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to describe the current role of occupational therapy in care homes in South Africa.

Methods: We used a cross-sectional online survey to gather data across South Africa. Occupational therapists were recruited using convenience sampling from care homes (n = 333), our networks (n = 35), and snowballing (n = 4). Data analysis included descriptive statistics and principal components analysis with IBM SPSS 22.0.0.0 software.

Results: Of the 77 occupational therapists we identified, 30 completed the survey. Almost all used at least one formal assessment, most often worked with residents in groups, and focussed on meaningful activity. Those working more hours also worked with staff and families. The occupational therapy role included three components: 1) Promoting meaningful activity and independence among residents with specific health conditions; 2) Providing indirect services to reduce risk, modify the environment, and manage; and 3) Education and advocacy for residents, their families, and staff.

Conclusion: Occupational therapists in South Africa provide innovative services to improve well-being within interdisciplinary care home teams. This research will enable occupational therapists to more clearly position themselves within those teams.

