

Occupational therapists delivering the public health and health promotion agenda

Making every contact count!

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What are public health and health promotion?

The terms “public health” and “health promotion” are sometimes used interchangeably but both refer to helping people stay well by enabling them to exert control over the determinants of health. They can refer to upstream interventions for the well population to prevent ill health, interventions which target at risk groups to prevent the development of health problems and working with those with chronic disease to make the best improvements possible to their health.

Why are these topics important for occupational therapy now?

The current financial climate and demographics predicting an explosion in “lifestyle” diseases means there is increased emphasis on how people can best look after their health and wellbeing. Occupational therapists are being asked to “use every contact with an individual to maintain or improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing where possible, in particular targeting the main lifestyle risk factors: diet, physical activity, alcohol and tobacco” (Future Forum 2012).

What is the OT evidence base in public health and health promotion?

Our evidence-base is already growing in this area: A recent systematic review (Needle et al 2011) identified that occupational therapy interventions in health promotion existed in the areas of enduring mental health problems, rheumatoid arthritis, pain and fatigue, pulmonary rehabilitation, stroke, drug and alcohol problems, and falls prevention. Some examples include:



With healthy older people

Regular occupational therapy sessions encouraging older people to carry out daily routines and activities can help maintain or improve their health and wellbeing (NICE 2008). This should include providing information to assist older people gaining greater knowledge of personal care, staying active and safety issues. The NHS Evidence QIPP collection includes Pre-emptive occupational therapy for healthy older people to inform decision-makers of the benefits of developing occupational therapy health promotion services.



With children who are obese

Occupational therapy nutritional educational programmes for children who are obese using play activities such as interactive board games and video games can effectively promote their understanding of healthy nutritional concepts (Munguba et al 2008).



With people who have fallen

The development of falls' prevention services in the community can reduce the fall rate and improve clinical outcomes for older people who have previously fallen and called an ambulance for assistance. Outcomes include increased levels of activities of daily living (Logan et al 2010).



With people with dementia

Community occupational therapy is both cost effective and beneficial for older adults with dementia and their care givers. It improves the older adult's mood, quality of life, health status and increases the care giver's sense of control over their life (Graff et al 2007).

What are our future opportunities and responsibilities?

Needle et al (2011) describe how the growing evidence-base for allied health professionals (AHPs) in health promotion still has weaknesses including a lack of any theoretical background, poorly planned interventions which are not systematically delivered and weak evaluation. They suggest that AHPs should be educated to approach giving public health and health promotion information, advice and support as a complex intervention, in line with profession's existing perspective of Occupational therapy defined as a complex intervention (Creek 2003). This would involve the development of:

- A sound theoretical understanding of how occupational therapy interventions bring about change in public health and health promotion
- An ability to identify the causal chain in occupational therapy interventions so weak sections can be improved
- Evaluation processes that are robust enough to discover implementation problems
- Tailoring occupational therapy interventions so they are appropriate to local settings
- Co- development of public health and health promotion interventions and evaluation with other colleagues.

As our understanding and evaluation of these interventions improve, it will increase the profession's capacity to “make every contact count”. Not only are occupational therapists already working with people on aspects of public health and health promotion activity, but there is an expectation that this focus will form part of the delivery of all occupational therapy interventions in the future.

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