The Effectiveness of Occupational Therapy Local Authority Social Services’ Interventions for Older People in Great Britain: A Critical Literature Review

Key findings

Effectiveness:
- The effectiveness of occupational therapy for older service users in social care services is complicated by the diverse contexts in which intervention takes place and the inherent problems in disaggregating occupational therapy from other aspects of the service.
- Occupational therapy is generally claimed to be effective in improving quality of life and independence for service users.
- Where occupational therapists are part of reablement and rehabilitation teams, they contribute to cost-effectiveness through savings on home care and residential care.
- Service users reported high levels of satisfaction with occupational therapy services once received.
- The literature revealed that a range of outcome measures are used by social services occupational therapists, although not consistently, and no single outcome measure emerged as being specifically appropriate for use in social care settings.
- Outcome measures that are generally used in healthcare are not necessarily appropriate in social care where the focus is on maintenance rather than improvement. Setting realistic timescales to measure outcomes, especially for housing adaptations, was considered crucial.

Other themes which emerged from the analysis were: the nature of occupational therapy services for older people; influences on occupational therapy service provision; occupational therapy professional issues; access to services; occupational therapy intervention; collaborative working; issues for service users and carers; time-related issues; communication issues and reshaping services.

Project aims

The study aimed to critically review and synthesise the post-2000 evidence on the effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions for older people in social care services in Great Britain in preventing the need for complex packages of care, by using a wide range of published and unpublished literature to investigate:
1. The nature of social services occupational therapy interventions for older people in Great Britain.
2. The policy contexts and organisational factors that influence the delivery of such occupational therapy interventions.
3. The effectiveness of these interventions in maintaining older people's independence and preventing dependency, and how this is evaluated.
4. The benefits of occupational therapy interventions for older people themselves.
5. The cost-effectiveness of such interventions.

Background

Occupational therapists in social services have traditionally been engaged in the provision of equipment and adaptations aimed at enabling people with disabilities to remain active within their own homes and communities (Mountain 2000). Although occupational therapists in social services for adults make up a small proportion of the social care workforce (approximately 2% in England, 1.3% in Scotland and 1.5% in Wales) they have a key role to play in promoting individuals’ self-reliance and resourcefulness (COT 2008). Despite their small numbers, occupational therapists are reported as handling over 35% of the referrals for adult social care services and their skills have been identified as key to the delivery of government policies in England, Scotland and Wales (Riley 2010, Riley et al 2008, Riley 2007). Since Mountain’s (2000) review of the literature, no reviews have concentrated specifically on Great Britain, or on the impact of occupational therapists’ interventions for older adults in social care settings.
Conclusion

The integrated nature of social services and collaborative working, together with differences in working practices across local authorities, makes occupational therapy difficult to disaggregate from other aspects of social services. This review, nonetheless, has identified that occupational therapists in local authority social services, despite being a small proportion of the workforce, are effective in providing services that maintain older people's independence and improve their quality of life in a cost-effective way. To ensure effectiveness, interventions must be delivered in a timely manner and this can be compromised by organisational constraints and the high demand for occupational therapy services.

Summary of the recommendations

Occupational therapists need to:

- Acknowledge the importance of their role in providing equipment and adaptations that effectively contribute to older service users' occupational engagement, independence, health and well-being.
- Be more proactive in publicising the effectiveness of their interventions more widely.
- Be more proactive in engaging in wider policy and organisational issues.
- Investigate the appropriate use of outcome measures.
- Carry out regular audits and evaluations to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their services.
- Publish the evidence supporting the effectiveness of their interventions.

Local authorities need to:

- Identify mechanisms for assisting older service users through complex processes, such as disabled facilities grants and major adaptations.
- Implement procedures to reduce the disproportionate amount of time that occupational therapists (a scarce resource) spend on administration such as completing shared assessments.
- Support occupational therapists in widening their role into rehabilitation and reablement.
- Identify appropriate follow-up procedures for older service users once occupational therapy interventions are completed.
- Ensure that estimated waiting times at all stages in the process are published and accessible to service users.

Publications


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References


