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UWS researchers help raise the bar for occupational therapy practice

A unique project by an academic at the University of Western Sydney is helping to raise the standards in occupational therapy practice.

Funded by the Motor Accidents Authority of NSW, the two-year research project aims to increase occupational therapists' use of evidence in practice. Evidence-based practice involves therapists searching worldwide for relevant research, and incorporating the best evidence into their work.

According to chief investigator and occupational therapist Annie McCluskey, published evidence is still under-utilised by occupational therapists. This is despite a push internationally for health professionals to base their practice on recent research instead of information from out-of-date textbooks.

" Occupational therapists, along with other health professionals are expected to adopt a more evidence-based approach to their practice," says Ms McCluskey.

" Recent research indicates that occupational therapists want to adopt evidence-based practice, but few feel they have the necessary skills to do so. This lack of skill presents a major barrier to change. Other barriers include a lack of time, lack of access to the Internet, and even lack of a computer on their desk at work.

" The goal of evidence-based practice is to decrease the use of ineffective healthcare interventions and boost the use of proven, effective ones. There can be large variations in practice when health professionals do not read or apply relevant research findings to their work.

" Our project involves training over 100 occupational therapists from across NSW. What we are trying to do is encourage occupational therapists to routinely ask themselves what evidence exists, if any for commonly used treatments; to check if there is any new research that they should know about; to critically appraise that research for quality, and then apply it in practice."

As part of the first stage of the project, workshops were held at the University of Western Sydney for participating occupational therapists. Project manager Meryl Lovarini then conducted follow-up visits and offered telephone support. Visits have been conducted to sole practitioners as far as Broken Hill and Wagga Wagga.

" The workshops and follow-up support involved teaching the participants how to search electronic sources for research information, evaluate the quality of research evidence and apply the best evidence to their practice," says Ms McCluskey.

" The aim was to have occupational therapists move from traditional methods of keeping up-to-date on effective treatments - for example using textbooks that are often out of date or having a chat with a colleague - to a greater emphasis on electronic sources of research information accessed via the internet, and then appraising that research for quality".

" After the workshops were completed, we measured changes in knowledge, skills and use of evidence by those who had received training. We surveyed participants and asked them to keep ongoing records of their evidence-based work activities."

In order to showcase the skills developed by the participating occupational therapists, a one-day conference was held in February at the university. Over 80 professionals attended the conference.

" Participating occupational therapists presented a summary of evidence relevant to their clinical question," says Ms McCluskey.

" They outlined the process used to search for and answer these questions, and produced a 'bottom line' statement on the effectiveness of interventions investigated." Feedback from conference attendees was overwhelmingly positive with comments such as: 'The presenters knowledge and motivation to increase the use of EBP was fabulous' and 'The calibre of critical thinking and analysis was very impressive'.

Ms McCluskey says that final results of the project will be available later this year.

" A website will also be developed mid-year to disseminate the summaries of evidence, and provide a range of free accessible evidence-based resources," she says.

" Overall we hope this project will result in increased use of up-to-date research by occupational therapists in NSW and help raise professional standards.

" Not only will increased use of research evidence have benefits for the profession, it will also lead to better use of health resources and benefits for consumers of occupational therapy services. Clinicians, as well as academics and students are now expected to know how to find and use the best research the profession has to offer."

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