

Occupational Therapy: Cost-Effective Solutions for a Changing Health System

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Occupational therapy is a skilled health profession dedicated to the improvement and maximization of function and performance so that people can live healthier, more productive, and more satisfying lives. Current reforms to the health care delivery system emphasize paying for quality, high-value care rather than volume and providing better care that leads to healthier populations (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2015). Many of these reforms also focus on the provision of primary health care services.

As part of an interprofessional care team, occupational therapy practitioners can play a distinct role, shaped by their unique knowledge of the effects that habits and routines have on an individual's health and wellness (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). There is compelling evidence that occupational therapy provides cost-effective interventions that address many of the U.S. health care system's greatest needs.

Age-Related Decline

As the American population ages, accompanying declines in physical health, mental well-being, and functional ability are expected to contribute to growing national health care costs. Fortunately, factors such as diet, lifestyle and daily routine, social support, and exercise have been shown to delay age-related decline. Occupational therapy practitioners can provide activity-based **interventions that maximize independence and enhance functioning for older adults**. In two large randomized controlled trials, an occupational therapy lifestyle intervention for an ethnically diverse array of community-dwelling older adults was shown to lead to **significant, lasting positive change in bodily pain, social functioning, mental health, composite mental functioning, life satisfaction, and depressive symptomatology** (Clark et al., 1997, 2012). This intervention approach has also been shown to lead to **health care savings** that exceed the intervention's modest costs (Hay et al., 2002).

Falls Prevention

Falls represent the leading cause of injury death among older adults and had an estimated **direct medical cost of \$34 billion in 2013** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Occupational therapy practitioners work with older adults to scan the home environment for hazards and evaluate the individual for limitations that contribute to falls. Recommendations often include a combination of interventions that target improving physical abilities to perform daily tasks, modifying the environment, and changing activity patterns and behaviors. Research has shown that occupational therapy interventions **save money by reducing the rate and risk of falls** (Gillespie et al., 2012; Haines et al., 2004) and that these interventions **significantly reduce mortality** in older adults (Jutkowitz et al., 2012).

Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia

Occupational therapy practitioners work with individuals with dementia to **enhance function**, promote relationships and social participation, and maximize quality of life. Occupational therapy focuses on capitalizing on a person's strengths to improve daily functioning. Common intervention strategies include environmental modification, evaluation of daily routines, wellness-promoting activities, and restoration of physical skills. Occupational therapy practitioners also provide education and training to caregivers. Research has shown that occupational therapy for individuals with dementia **reduces the need for informal care** (Gitlin et al., 2010; Knapp, Lemmi, & Romeo, 2013) and saves money by **improving health status and quality of life** for both patients and their caregivers while **decreasing hospital and skilled nursing admissions** (Graffet al., 2008).

Chronic Pain

More than 130 million Americans suffer from chronic pain, and it is estimated that pain is responsible for more than \$100 billion annually in health care, disability, and related expenses (National Institutes of Health, 2011). Chronic pain is a functional illness that can interfere with a person's ability to engage in meaningful activities. With the help of occupational therapy, individuals with chronic pain can learn to manage the physical and psychological effects of pain so that they can lead active and productive lives. Occupational therapy practitioners can identify pain triggers, teach techniques to decrease the frequency and duration of painful episodes, and recommend adaptive strategies to decrease pain during routine tasks. This approach to pain management has been shown to lead to dramatic cost savings by improving function, increasing return-to-work rates, reducing disability claims, and decreasing dependence on prescription medications (Gatchel & Okifuji, 2006).

Conclusion

Occupational therapy has a distinct role in new primary health care delivery systems that focuses less on specific diagnoses and more on preventing illness. As demonstrated, occupational therapy interventions can not only reduce costs but can also improve the overall health, quality of life, and daily participation of individuals and their caregivers.

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