

Health Policy Researchers Find Occupational Therapy is Only Spending Category That Reduces Hospital Readmissions



An independent study published in *Medical Care Research and Review* found that “occupational therapy is the only spending category where additional spending has a statistically significant association with lower readmission rates” for the three health conditions studied: heart failure, pneumonia, and acute myocardial infarction.

The researchers from Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland School of Medicine used a rigorous methodology “to provide information that hospital executives can use to make efficient resource allocation decisions.”

Using Medicare claims and cost data to examine the association between hospital spending for specific services and the CMS Hospital Compare 30-day risk—standardized readmission rates for heart failure, pneumonia, and acute myocardial infarction, the researchers evaluated 19 distinct spending categories (including occupational therapy) using multivariable regressions in 2,791 hospitals for the heart failure analysis; 2,818 hospitals for the pneumonia analysis; and 1,595 hospitals for the acute myocardial infarction analysis.

The researchers identified occupational therapy as “one spending category that affects both the clinical and social determinants of health” and noted that “investing in OT has the potential to improve care quality without significantly increasing overall hospital spending.”

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The researchers found six particular occupational therapy interventions that may lower readmissions:

1. Provide recommendations and training for caregivers.
2. Determine whether patients can safely live independently, or require further rehabilitation or nursing care.
3. Address existing disabilities with assistive devices so patients can safely perform activities of daily living (e.g., using the bathroom, bathing, getting dressed, making a meal).
4. Perform home safety assessments before discharge to suggest modifications.
5. Assess cognition and the ability to physically manipulate things like medication containers, and provide training when necessary.
6. Work with physical therapists to increase the intensity of inpatient rehabilitation.

The researchers also noted that “occupational therapy places a unique and immediate focus on patients’ functional and social needs, which can be important drivers of readmission if left unaddressed... Occupational therapy “focuses on a vital issue related to readmission rates—can the patient be discharged safely into her or his environment?” If not, occupational therapists address issues from physical barriers to daily function to support networks.

“The findings of this important study highlight just one of the many roles occupational therapy practitioners are playing in improving quality and reducing health care costs,” said AOTA Executive Director Fred Somers. “Occupational therapy practitioners are proving to be an essential member of any interprofessional team successfully addressing the changing demands of the health care delivery system.”