

Addressing the Unique Challenges Faced by Occupational Therapy Practitioners in Acute Care Settings

Author: Sabina Khan, PhD, OTD, OTR/L

Acute care occupational therapy practitioners encounter a distinct set of challenges in their daily practice. One of the most formidable challenges is the temporal constraints while striving to deliver optimal care to patients. Research has demonstrated that acute care occupational therapy practitioners often have a shortage of time at their disposal to conduct assessments, develop treatment plans, and deliver interventions leading to feelings of stress, burnout, and professional malaise (Bradley et al., 2019). Practitioners frequently grapple with the vexing task of balancing the competing demands of patient care within limited temporal confines.

Another notable challenge among practitioners in acute care is the short duration practitioners have to spend with patients. Patients in acute care have brief hospital stays, which challenges practitioners' in establishing meaningful therapeutic relationships quickly. This challenge may impact the quality of care as well as continuity of care ability (Bradley et al., 2019; Edelstein et al., 2022). Studies have shown that high patient turnover can foster increased stress and burnout among healthcare professionals, including occupational therapists (Bradley et al., 2019; Edelstein et al., 2022).

A third distinct challenge is managing medically complex conditions. Patients hospitalized frequently present with multifaceted and heterogeneous health conditions that necessitate specialized knowledge and skills from occupational therapy

practitioners. Research has shown that acute care therapists may have limited exposure to certain diagnoses, which can constrain their ability to provide optimal care to these patients (Brown et al., 2018). Given the multifaceted and complex challenges faced by acute care occupational therapy practitioners, it is imperative to identify and implement effective evidence-based strategies to mitigate these challenges. Below are some strategies to address the challenges of managing time constraints, patient turnover, and complex conditions.

Strategy 1: Managing Time Constraints

In this fast-paced setting, practitioners must balance the need to provide quality care with the need to see as many patients as possible (Persson et al., 2020). To manage time constraints effectively, practitioners can adopt a task prioritization schema and focus on the most critical issues first by identifying patients who demonstrate an elevated risk for functional regression and focusing on interventions that will have the most significant impact on their outcomes (Roberts et al., 2020). Practitioners should also judiciously adhere to principles underlying evidence-based practice (EBP) guidelines as a roadmap for their interventions. This assures utilization of treatments that, beyond their theoretical grounding, have empirically demonstrated their efficiency and effectiveness, thereby optimizing the potential therapeutic outcomes.

Another strategy for managing time is to collaborate with other members of the health care team (Leddy et al., 2020). This includes working closely with nursing, physicians, social work, and other rehabilitation team members to streamline care delivery, discharge planning needs, and ensure that each patient's unique functional needs are met effectively and efficiently. By working together, practitioners can delegate

tasks, reduce duplication of efforts, and maximize the use of available resources. For example, some of the evaluation or in-take questions by patients regarding home environment, prior level of function, or support system could be shared among the team to optimize time and active therapeutic interventions with the patient.

Streamlining technology with patients is another strategy to support time management in acute care and promote patient outcomes. Electronic documentation systems can quickly and easily allow a therapist to document patient progress, assessments and treatment plans. Moreover, telehealth offers an invaluable solution for liaising with patients who are impeded by physical limitations or those who wish to mitigate exposure to communicable diseases, as might be necessary during a pandemic. Not only does it facilitate provision of therapeutic services, but it serves as a platform for training patients and their families on safe and effective usage of assistive devices, particularly when in-person attendance is unfeasible. By harnessing the potential of telehealth, acute care occupational therapy practitioners can potentially expand their patient reach and improve efficiency of care, even amidst staff shortages at the healthcare facility (Curtz et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the proliferation of mobile applications and digital tools, afford practitioners an array of resources to augment the efficiency and effectiveness of care delivery. For instance, applications designed for facilitating functional evaluations, therapeutic exercises, and cognitive training are at the disposal of practitioners, fostering an environment conducive to innovative, data-driven, and patient-centric care (Hakes et al., 2020). These digital aids serve as adjuncts to traditional therapeutic

modalities, enabling practitioners to extend their reach beyond conventional confines and enrich the therapeutic process.

Strategy 2: Managing Patient Turnover

A study including 17,000 Medicare patients with HRRP-qualifying diagnoses, found patients who received acute care occupational therapy services had reduced odds of readmission if they received higher frequencies of those services while hospitalized (Edelstein et al., 2022). For efficacious management of patient turnover, therapists must be able to develop a clear plan of care that is tailored to the patient's needs and prioritizing interventions that will have the most significant impact on their outcomes (Roberts et al., 2020). Prioritizing assessments and EBP based on level of urgency and need of the patient can help therapists focus time and resources on patients who require the most immediate and intensive interventions, while still providing effective and efficient treatment for all patients.

Another strategy for managing high patient turnover is educating patients and their families about conditions, treatment plans and the importance of their active participation in their care continuum, both during hospitalization and post-discharge (Gafni-Lachter & Ben-Sasson, 2022). Such educational interventions can bolster patient engagement and motivation, propelling adherence to home exercise regimens, thereby catalyzing recovery trajectories and shortening hospital stays. Lastly, inter-professional collaboration is crucial to streamline care and mitigate redundancy of efforts. By coordinating interventions and disseminating information with nursing, physicians, social work, and other rehabilitation colleagues, the healthcare team can work together, ensuring an efficient, comprehensive and effective delivery of patient care.

Strategy 3: Managing Complex Medical Conditions

To manage complex cases effectively, therapists must have a deep understanding of the patient's medical history, functional status, and current condition or procedure(s). One way to approach this challenging task is to seek out education and training opportunities to better understand complex medical conditions and their impact on occupational performance (Miller et al., 2022). This includes attending conferences, workshops and seminars as well as engaging in self-directed learning through reading peer-reviewed journals in the health science professions.

Engaging in interdisciplinary rounds to discuss patients with complex medical conditions and develop collaborative care plans can help ensure all healthcare professionals are on the same page. Collaboration with other members of the healthcare team is integral to better understanding complex medical conditions and their management (Leddy et al., 2020). Such an integrative approach accentuates the value of collective expertise as well as a holistic and collaborative environment for enhanced healthcare outcomes.

Future Implications for Practice

As the healthcare system as well as patient medical needs present complex challenges, occupational therapy practitioners are equipped to solve these challenges while remaining patient centered. It is essential for practitioners to use evidence-based strategies to reduce or mitigate challenges commonly experienced in acute care. By actively using evidence-based strategies in collaboration with innovative ideas may positively impact patient outcomes, reduce hospital readmissions, support job satisfaction, and ultimately enhance occupational therapy's professional reputation.

Practitioners are encouraged to use their unique knowledge and skill set of task analysis to streamline care and demonstrate the value of occupational therapy as part of the healthcare team. Occupational therapy practitioners need to be leaders in using technology to streamline assessments, documentation, and communication methods among patients, families, and other healthcare professions.

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Author Biography

Dr. Khan is an assistant professor at the University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences in Miami, FL. Her clinical research is in the field of women's health, pediatric brain injury and neurorehabilitation. She has been practicing as a licensed occupational therapist for over ten years. She is the owner of Bloom Therapy LLC providing perinatal and pediatric neurorehabilitation services to the community.

Contact information: skhan@usa.edu