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A partnership between occupational therapy and dentistry

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BDJ Letter

Occupational Therapy and Dental Services: An emerging partnership?

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Sir, it is clear that the dental environment and procedures can make a visit to the dentist an unpleasant and challenging experience for autistic children and adolescents and act as a barrier to care. Sensory sensitivities associated with autism can also pose challenges for the dental team impacting the provision of dental care.¹ As a result autistic children and adolescents are more likely than their neurotypical peers to receive treatment under general anaesthesia.¹

Our team is collaborating with Stacey Venner, Occupational Therapist (OT) and experienced dental nurse who encountered first-hand the barriers to dental engagement for those from the autistic community and identified a need for multi-professional working that incorporates an Occupational Therapy perspective. Occupational Therapy could be an ideal profession to assess and where required, to provide a care plan for specific care needs of patients prior to dental visits.

The particular characteristics of Occupational Therapy could be of benefit to improving the delivery of person-centred dental care:

- Occupational Therapy is a profession that is focused on identifying a person's emotional, social, and physical needs and facilitating changes to improve their overall health and wellbeing. OT's have the skills to provide appropriate strategies to increase independence and promote health and wellbeing.
- OTs seek to analyse and support the participation of people in daily activities including self care. This can include identifying the barriers to good oral health and access to dental care. They can provide support in relation to many areas associated with oral health, including brushing teeth and diet.
- OTs are aware of sensory needs and sensitivities. They are well placed to advise on reasonable adaptations that can improve the environment for children and adolescents with sensory differences.

Traditionally, OT's use a person centred, holistic approach whereby they work together with the service user to help tackle barriers and facilitate personal goals. In addition, OTs are skilled to offer universal, targeted and specialist levels of service including training, mentoring, consultation and group work, working collaboratively across services and external agencies. Thus having a positive impact on the wider community.

The authors are unaware of any services in the UK where OT's have partnered with dental services. However, studies conducted in the US have shown that such a collaboration may help in reducing some of the barriers that autistic people have in relation to dental care by adapting the dental environment.² We propose that further work in the UK is warranted to fully explore how OT's and dental teams can work together for patient benefit.

References

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