

Managing the load: The impact of redesign principles on community health occupational therapy waiting times

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Background

Lengthy waiting times for community health occupational therapy services have often been linked to insufficient staffing to meet demand. Evidence from process redesign principles suggests it may be absent or poor client-flow management processes that are the core issues. A quality improvement initiative was undertaken at Caulfield Community Health Service, Melbourne, to reduce waiting times for clients accessing occupational therapy services.

Methods

The quality improvement initiative applied process redesign methodology to measure capacity and demand of occupational therapy services, develop key performance indicators for staff, refine systems and processes to eliminate inefficiencies and strengthen the role of the Allied Health Assistant. The improvement activity was implemented over a 1 year period within the adult health teams. Client progress and barriers to timely discharge were monitored via an electronic client journey board.

Results

Outcome measures collected pre and post redesign implementation include: client wait time and number of clients who 'did not wait' for service. Results indicate a 25% and 70% reduction in the occupational therapy service waiting times for urgent and routine referrals respectively. There was a 50% reduction in the number of clients who 'did not wait' for the service. Demographic data pre and post was analysed and determined to be comparable.

Discussion

The quality improvement initiative has resulted in improved timeliness of access to occupational therapy services for clients. The impact of reduced waiting times on client outcomes requires further investigation. The process redesign methodology can be applied to all disciplines across a community health setting.