

The wait is over: Early health care delivery for acquired hand conditions.

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Background

Acquired hand conditions including carpal tunnel syndrome, trigger finger and basal joint arthritis increase public health system demands for assessment and management. Current management of these conditions typically involves a lengthy delay between referral and initial medical appointment, meanwhile the condition may progress and the option of non-surgical management is eliminated.

Hand therapists have the knowledge and capability to initiate assessment and management of common hand conditions. Current literature indicates many patients with acquired hand conditions can be successfully managed by a senior hand therapist. Therefore, an advanced practice hand therapy collaboration (including metropolitan and regional health services) has been established with support from the Department of Health and Human Services advanced practice grants.

Methods:

- Scoping review undertaken of existing pathways within each organisation
- Advanced practice hand therapy collaboration established, facilitating communication and idea sharing
- Each organisation created an advanced practice hand therapy role suiting their needs
- Care pathways and credentialing packages were developed and implemented for advanced practice hand therapist(s)
- Screening clinics established to determine appropriateness for non-surgical management
- Patient rated outcome measures utilised to evaluate effectiveness

Results:

This collaboration has increased the networking of hand therapists (both Occupational Therapists and Physiotherapists) working across organisations and has enabled the development of consistent pathways, assessment tools and clinical management documents.

Patient flow and access to care has been greatly improved. Patients with acquired hand conditions are currently accessing expert assessment within one month of receiving referral, enabling non-surgical intervention for patients with mild-moderate symptoms.

Discussion:

Advanced practice clinicians can positively influence patient flow and are sufficiently skilled to identify patients appropriate for non-surgical management. Preliminary outcome data also supports this change in model of care. This collaborative approach has enabled consistency across healthcare services and could benefit other allied health disciplines and organisations.