

Evaluation of speech pathology therapy assistant roles in an acute stroke unit

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Background:

The use of allied health assistants as a means for promoting efficiency of services provided by allied health professionals is well recognised. However, evaluation of the use of speech pathology assistants in the acute setting is currently limited.

Methods:

The aim of this quality improvement project was to trial and evaluate speech pathology therapy assistant roles in a busy acute stroke unit, and evaluate the impact on the quality and efficiency of the speech pathology service.

Five key tasks were identified as suitable to delegate to speech pathology therapy assistants including: medical chart reviews, mouth cares, mealtime reviews, early communication intervention, and patient and family education.

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected by the acute stroke unit speech pathologist and therapy assistant for seven weeks including: the type of task and frequency with which it was delegated to the therapy assistant, the outcome of delegated tasks (e.g., change in speech pathology management, speech pathologist review not required), and impact on speech pathology workload.

Results:

Data indicated that when speech pathology therapy assistants conducted a delegated task, speech pathologists were not required to provide direct intervention on the same day for approximately 30% of those patients. The speech pathologist could then attend to new stroke referrals more promptly, focus on the assessment and management of patients identified as high risk, provide patient services that are often deprioritised in a busy caseload, and attend to other tasks such as quality improvement projects and ward education.

Discussion:

Results suggested that by therapy assistants performing delegated tasks, a better quality, and more efficient service was able to be provided to patients. The speech pathologist was able to more efficiently prioritise and manage the caseload due to screening conducted by the therapy assistant and the ability to delegate other important, but often deprioritised tasks.