



Media Contact

Annie Eddey | Senior Account Executive
Olive PR Solutions, Inc.
annie@oliveprsolutions.com
m. 973.449.0921 | o. 619.955.5285

Occupational Therapy—a Valuable and Misunderstood Service

Mission Home Health highlights OT Month this April

SAN DIEGO (March 26, 2013)—April is Occupational Therapy (OT) Month and Mission Home Health takes this opportunity to dispel the many misconceptions about OT, which is a misunderstood and underutilized service among the public and even other healthcare professionals.

National figures show substantially less utilization of OT services by comparison to other services with Medicare statistics commonly showing equivalent referrals or reimbursements at less than one-quarter of Physical Therapy (PT). The name itself can be misleading. "Occupational" was intended to represent the more global definition of "anything that one does to occupy oneself" rather than the more common employment definition.

OTs deal specifically with barriers to function that inhibit participation in meaningful and safe activity. OTs in the home environment help restore functional life behavior through a variety of interventions such as physical rehab, sensory retraining, education and modification of a patient's home environment.

"The perception is that OTs help people bathe and dress. While these are functional areas we certainly address, we're not in the business of bathing people—we're in the business of restoring maximum functional independence," said Jon Mancil, lead OT at Mission Home Health. "My goal is to broaden the understanding and enhance the perception held by healthcare providers and the community about the key role OTs play in developing independent function and creating sustainable solutions to keep people in their homes."

Mission Home Health's OTs work with patients and caregivers who are having difficulty maintaining a safe and sufficient quality of life in their home. Common conditions include falls or fall risk, dementia or early memory loss, debilitating injuries and chronic conditions such as arthritis, surgical aftercare and/or any other condition that reduces the capacity to function normally. When individuals are having trouble performing routine skills it can be extremely disruptive to health and wellness, often leading to depression. OTs are invaluable in helping individuals restore their activity routine—and their life.

"One of our more significant responsibilities is working closely with the caregiver," said Mancil. "It is commonplace to find people performing below their optimal level because a caregiver progressively takes over every element of a task for the sake of compassion and efficiency. The result is that the client declines in health and ability. For obvious reasons, this will lead to increased risk of injury and hospitalization. There is also strong correlation between loss of self-driven function and depression."

The role of the OT is to create a plan to optimize the caregiver-client dynamic by slowly reintroducing client participation in routine activities as their skill and safety permit. Educating both the client and caregiver about the life-long benefits of this method is essential for long-term compliance.

Another major responsibility is working with the physical environment. Mission's OTs go into the home and assist with the safety of the environment to make sure it is conducive to independent function.

"If a patient has a high risk of falling then not only should a physical therapist assess and treat the patient, but an OT should be ordered to assess the safety and balance while performing their essential activities and daily living functions in the home," said Mission's Director of Rehabilitation Services, Warren Smith.

Lastly, OTs may work with any number of specialized interventions such as neuromuscular therapies and sensory retraining. If a patient is unable to brush his or her teeth because of weakness and loss of sensation in their dominant hand after a stroke, an OT may work on interventions to drive the return of strength and sensation while also seeking ways to adapt the hand and/or the toothbrush. For example, using a larger or softer handle for easier hold, a cuff to secure it to the hand or grip tape so that it sticks to the hand for a more secure grasp.

"In healthcare in general, one of our larger issues is compliance. Compliance is, at least in part, a direct reflection of education and understanding," said Mancil. "It's crucial that our clients are educated and work to apply and reinforce that education repetitiously until they reach the point of consistent performance. The healthcare system is under tremendous stress—we have to be out there doing everything we can to reduce costly and unnecessary injuries and hospitalizations."

About Mission Healthcare:

Mission Healthcare is a clinically owned and operated organization whose services include Mission Home Health, Mission Hospice, and Mission Home Care. By providing a continuum and continuity of care, Mission Healthcare strives to have a positive impact on the lives of patients, their families, and their healthcare partners no matter what their needs may be. Mission Healthcare utilizes all available resources to provide the highest level of care possible to their patients, all while in the optimal healing environment, the home. www.homewithmission.com

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