Factors Affecting Masters’ of Occupational Therapy Student Attitudes Towards Persons with Mental Illness

Peter Bailey, OTS; Ryan Hortum, OTS; Nancy Parchevsky, OTS; Kate Summers, OTS; and Barbara Tsai, OTS; Elizabeth Cara, PhD, OTR/L, MFCC; Megan Chang, PhD, OTR/L; and Carolyn Glogoski, PhD, OTR/L

INTRODUCTION: Studies have shown that masters’ of occupational therapy (MOT) student attitudes towards persons with mental illness are influenced by: upbringing (CDC, 2012), training (Christie et al., 1985; Gilbert & Strong, 2000; Penny et al., 2001), and students’ perceptions of self-efficacy or competence in working with persons with mental illness (Ezersky et al., 1989). This quantitative study examined factors affecting MOT student attitudes towards persons with mental illness. First, second, and third year MOT students from universities in California were recruited for an anonymous survey that examined how academic and personal exposures to persons with mental illness affected student attitudes. Attitudes were measured using the Community Attitudes Toward Persons with Mental Illness (CAMI) survey (Taylor & Dear, 1981). Results indicated personal exposures and volunteer work improved attitudes. Academic exposures did not directly improve attitudes, however, they did indicate an increase in a student’s perceived competency. Additionally, there was a statistically significant relationship between student perceived competency and more positive attitudes. Future research is needed to determine what components of curriculum build perceived competency.

METHODS:

Type- Quantitative Survey design

Participants- First, second, and third year MOT students from California Universities offering accredited master’s level Occupational Therapy programs.

Instrument- Online survey consisting of questions from the Community Attitudes Towards the Mentally Ill (CAMI) scale, and research generated questions on demographics, academic and personal exposures to persons with mental illness, and perceived confidence in abilities to provide services to this population.

Procedure- Recruitment emails were distributed to seven master’s level OT programs in California. These contacts distributed the survey link to their cohort. Students completed the survey online anonymously.

Data Analysis- Performed comparisons of academic and personal exposures and attitudes using student t-test and ANOVA in SPSS; linear correlations used to infer relationships between cumulative exposures and attitudes using Scilab.
DISCUSSION:
• Attitudes can be improved by personal exposures, such as having a family member with a mental illness.
• Volunteer work in a mental health setting showed improved attitudes and raised perceived competency. Supports Gilbert and Strong’s (2000) finding that direct contact improves attitudes.
• Academic exposures did not directly improve attitudes. However, they significantly correlated with increased perceived competency when viewed cumulatively.
• Higher perceived competence correlated with more positive attitudes.

IMPLICATIONS:
• MOT programs may improve attitudes by fostering students’ perceived competency.
• OTs will encounter persons with mental illness in all settings and must feel competent and comfortable providing quality care to this population.
• Findings support the efficacy of the new ACOTE standards that increased educational requirements meant to develop skills for working with persons with mental illness (AOTA, 2011). Nationwide measurement is needed to understand full effect.

REFERENCES:
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors, National Institute of Mental Health, The Carter Center Mental Health Program, (2012). Attitudes toward mental illness: Results from the behavioral risk factor surveillance system. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.