

BRIEFING PAPER

Workshop Two: National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and psychosocial disability

Background

Occupational therapists are well-recognised for their important contribution to the needs of Australians with disability. However, while mental health interventions are at the core of occupational therapy practice, and occupational therapists are represented in all areas of mental health practice, the profession is often overlooked as an important provider of mental health services. There is a real need to increase understanding of the unique skills and contribution of occupational therapists individually and as part of a multidisciplinary team. It is also important to understand how the interventions delivered by occupational therapists, and the issues those practitioners face, vary across funding schemes, in different settings, and for different client cohorts.

Psychosocial disability and the NDIS

The introduction of the NDIS has significantly impacted the lives of many Australians experiencing disability. It has significantly increased the level of funding available to support people with disability and provided new opportunities for people with disability to participate in the community. However, access to the NDIS continues to be more difficult for some cohorts. Access to supports for people with psychosocial disability has been particularly difficult leading to significant underrepresentation. Some of the reasons for this include the episodic nature of mental ill-health, the cost of meeting access requirements, and choosing not to apply as not perceiving themselves as having a disability.

A key principle of the NDIS is that it does not fund treatment or clinical services related to the symptoms of mental illness. Instead, NDIS access and supports are based on reduced functional capacity arising from psychosocial disability and should work in conjunction with mainstream supports to meet a person's needs. Recent documents produced by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) have sought to differentiate clinical and personal recovery and to emphasise the lack of responsibility for clinical recovery.

In practice however, people with psychosocial illness report issues in relation to coordination of mainstream and NDIS services. Some may find that they experience issues accessing mainstream supports if they are receiving NDIS funding due to an expectation by mainstream providers that all support needs are funded by the NDIS. The recent Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health found that plans were often unsuitable and underutilisation rates for participants with psychosocial disability were significantly higher. This was attributed to a range of factors including the overall responsiveness of plans to changing needs and availability of appropriate supports.

The NDIA has already undertaken reforms to address some of these issues including changes to Typical Support Plans, the introduction of the Complex Support Needs Pathway, and the introduction of Recovery Coaches. The NDIA also recently sought to introduce new assessment processes for prospective and current participants with the aim of improving the consistency of assessment processes and the size of support plans. While the NDIA will not introduce independent assessments, consultation is currently underway on legislative changes to the NDIS Rules for Becoming a Participant to make it easier for people with psychosocial disability to demonstrate eligibility.

Workshop aims

This workshop is one of a series of advocacy-focused workshops that will bring together occupational therapists who work with clients with mental health needs to talk about the issues and barriers that most impact them in their day-to-day work. The workshops will seek to identify opportunities for improvement and reform. This will support work that Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) is undertaking to develop a strategic advocacy plan and campaign, focused on the mental health work of occupational therapists. OTA is being supported in the development of the mental health paper by SquareCircle Consulting.

Workshop questions

The questions below will be used to guide the discussion during the workshop. As the workshops may not provide sufficient time for all feedback to be discussed, participants are encouraged to provide written feedback on the questions before or after the workshop.

Funding scheme

1. What are the key challenges for you as a clinician under the NDIS?
2. What are the key challenges for your clients and/or quality clinical care under this scheme?
3. How well understood is the mental health OT role in this space by planners, support coordinators and other referrers, and families and participants?
4. Does the NDIS definition of psychosocial supports allow you to provide appropriate care?

Demographics and client needs

5. What are the demographics of the clients you work with in the context of this scheme or setting. E.g. children aged 0-12, young people aged 12-18, adults aged 18-65, older people aged 65 and over.
6. What are the support needs of the participants you support? What are typical diagnoses for those participants?
7. Do you identify specific outcomes and do you measure progress against these? How? Are measures consistent across clients or individual (e.g. goal-setting)?

Clinical supports

8. What do you define as a mental health related intervention in the context of the NDIS?
9. Where do behavioural interventions or support for people with autism spectrum disorder fit in with mental health supports?

10. Which of these interventions would you consider OT-specific interventions and which are general mental health style interventions?
11. Are there OT-specific interventions that are particularly relevant in this context and how does your work differ from other professions in this setting?
12. Are there OT interventions that you feel that you are unable to utilise due to constraints on accepted therapies or NDIS definitions?
13. What is the role of social prescribing in your clinical work and to what extent is this enabled or prevented by the scheme or setting in which you work.

Workforce

14. What are key workforce-related issues that impact you as a clinician working in this area?
 - a. How difficult is it to access appropriate training and supervision?
 - b. Are there significant waiting lists for the sorts of services that you provide or do you have issues recruiting and training?
 - c. Do you feel that OTs working in this area have the requisite skillset and experience?
15. How well are you able to interact with other health and non-health professionals with a role related to the mental health needs of the client you are supporting?
16. Do you interact with other roles such as recovery coaches, allied health assistants or peer workers? How well do those roles integrate with your own?

Additional information about the Thinking Ahead: Mental Health project

If you are interested in keeping up-to-date with the work being undertaken as part of the OTA Thinking Ahead: Mental Health project, please visit: <https://otaus.com.au/media-and-advocacy/mental-health-paper>. The website will include updates about progress on the project as well as providing information about any opportunities to participate in additional workshops or consultation activities. Updates will also be provided via OTA member communications channels.

If you would like to provide feedback or register interest in upcoming consultations, please contact: haveyoursay@otaus.com.au.