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Standardized Assessments: Ethical Principles For Use

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As cost containment and professional accountability become increasingly important in healthcare, so does concern about methods of assessing outcomes of treatment. In occupational therapy, this concern has resulted in growing emphasis on careful documentation of treatment and on research and program evaluation. However, adequate documentation is possible only if meaningful measures of change are available, and efforts to evaluate the effects of therapy are hampered by the absence of sufficient standardized assessments. The development of reliable, valid instruments has become a high priority for the profession, as reflected by discussion in the literature, and the activities of The American Occupational Therapy Association and the American Occupational Therapy Foundation.

In our enthusiasm for the development of standardized assessments, however, it would be wise to recognize some of the difficulties related to these methods of measurement. Standardized assessments of various types have been in existence for many years, and controversy has surrounded them for almost as long. Karmel (1) has identified four primary areas of debate: the effect of testing on the individual; the effects on institutions; the impact on society; and the characteristics of the tests themselves.

This paper discusses one of these issues, the fundamental limitation of standardized assessments as a means of evaluation. There is no question that considerable information can be gained through the use of standardized assessments and that they have an important function. There is also no question that they are open to all sorts of abuse and that professionals using them must be sensitive to that potential.

One way to deal with these concerns is through careful test development and selection. Definitions, construct validation, cultural bias, and numerous other factors must be addressed as each instrument is refined. Existing instruments can be selected on the basis of data about their reliability, validity, and appropriateness for the intended purpose. However, even the best assessment is open to misuse or misinterpretation, and professionals must concern themselves with the ethics of test use.

Ethical practice with regard to assessment is the best safeguard for the individual, the therapist, and society.

Because standardized assessment of patients in occupational therapy has not been given a great deal of attention until recent years, the matter is not addressed in the Principles of Occupational Therapy Ethics (2). The primary concern of the ethics statement, however, is clear. It is the therapist's responsibility to avoid harm to the patient. In the area of evaluation, the matter of avoiding harm deserves careful consideration. Other professions have given more attention to the issue, and it may be helpful to consider an example.

The American Psychological Association (APA) Ethical Principles for Psychologists (3) makes a statement comparable to that of the occupational therapy ethical guidelines with regard to client protection. In any activities they undertake, psychologists are responsible for the well-being of their clients, and they must avoid doing harm. The APA goes on, however, to outline quite specifically the nature of professional, ethical behavior with regard to testing. Principle 8 states that

In the development, publication, and utilization of psychological assessment techniques, psychologists make every effort to promote the welfare and best interests of the client. They guard against the misuse of assessment results. They respect the client's right to know the results, and the interpretations made and the bases for their conclusions and recommendations. Psychologists make every effort to maintain the security of tests and other assessment techniques within the limits of legal mandates. They strive to assure the appropriate use of assessment techniques by others (3).

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This statement is further expanded and explained, and outlines the approach taken by psychologists in their attempt to avoid misuse of tests. These principles seem to apply to occupational therapy as well, even though not clearly delineated in the ethical statement of the profession.

It is important to note that the ethical principles as defined by APA go beyond protection of the individual client. Security of test materials, for instance, is critical to maintaining the value of the test. If items are common knowledge, the potential for inaccurate results is greatly increased. In addition, psychologists view themselves as responsible for the behavior of others with regard to assessment. The guidelines indicate that psychologists should discourage the use of tests by those not qualified. This includes individuals they supervise, aides and assistants, and other professionals.

While APA ethical principles are not binding on occupational therapists, the behaviors they suggest relative to assessment present a model of action that is vital for the protection of the client, and, in our litigious society, for the therapist. Most therapists are well aware of practices not in keeping with the APA guidelines. In the interest of saving time, therapists occasionally encourage the administration of tests by untrained individuals. In the interest of saving money, therapists may violate the security of a test, to say nothing of copyright law, by copying portions of it for their own use. And, given the rather early stages in the development of standardized assessments in occupational therapy, therapists sometimes misrepresent, no matter how innocently, the value of a given assessment procedure and the meaning of the results. In fact, no instrument gives results so valid and comprehensive that treatment decisions can be based solely on that information.

At present, these actions can be traced to lack of awareness or perhaps to the absence of specific statements in occupational therapy for ethical behavior in the area of assessment. These excuses have outlived their validity, however, and therapists put themselves in a precarious position by ignoring ethical principles. Administrators are questioning more closely the activities of their staff members, and patients, increasingly aware of their status as consumers, are demanding that their interests be protected. Therapists may find themselves in trouble, both ethical and legal, if they continue to engage in practices that might be damaging to their patients. Misuse of tests and their results is a form of malpractice, and therapists do so at their own risk.

Occupational therapy as a profession prides itself on concern about its clients. This concern must extend to a clear understanding of assessment, and the potential good or harm that can be done in this process. It is time for the profession to make a clear statement about ethical practice in this sphere and to be sure that therapists possess sufficient information to behave in keeping with those principles.

REFERENCES