In Practice

Development and current status of occupational therapy driver assessment and rehabilitation in Victoria, Australia

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Introduction

The occupation of driving is highly valued by many members of our community (Liddle, 2003). However, participating in driving may be challenged by congenital disabilities; accident or injury resulting in physical, cognitive/perceptual or sensory disabilities; psychiatric disorders or drug use; or factors associated with ageing such as deteriorating vision. Occupational therapists aim to ensure that individuals can participate in as many of their chosen occupations as possible, hence we are ideally placed to optimise an individual’s capacity to drive independently and safely. In the state of Victoria, Australia, occupational therapists have been formally involved in helping clients to drive or resume driving over a 20-year period. This In Practice aims to document the innovative thinking that led to the development of the field of driver assessment and rehabilitation in occupational therapy in Victoria, thus acknowledging the work of some of the pioneers in this field. The article also examines the establishment of a training program for driver assessors, procedures and standards for driver assessment and rehabilitation in Victoria, research in the field and future directions. The primary sources of information for this In Practice were interviews with some of these pioneers, and surviving documents and reports from the School of Occupational Therapy, La Trobe University and OT AUSTRALIA – Victoria.

Identifying the need for specialist driver assessment and rehabilitation services

Until 1986, only medical practitioners or optometrists were legally authorised in Victoria to make recommendations to the licensing authorities regarding a person’s fitness to drive if the person was deemed to have a disability that could affect his/her driving ability. However, occupational therapists including Sue Gregory and Jenny Symes working in a Melbourne rehabilitation facility (Bethesda Hospital) were concerned about the fitness to drive of their clients who had experienced brain damage, and the assessment procedures in place. When reflecting on the impetus for occupational therapists to undertake driving assessments, Shelley Mc Laren (personal communication, October 2005) noted:

The common practice at that time was to involve a renowned driving instructor … who was with the RACV and who had offered assessment and rehabilitation to clients with a disability with one of the first modified driving school cars. He would take clients on a 1-h assessment and return to give the OT a recommendation about the client’s safety to drive. His experience was very valuable and his opinions were respected, however, the concern was that while [he had] driving expertise and experience, there was limited knowledge of the functional implications of … injuries and diseases…. The legality of enforcing recommendations was difficult and relied on a doctor completing the RTA form … and the insurance position of someone returning to drive was unclear …

Occupational therapists at the time reasoned that fitness to drive should be based on specialised off-road and on-road assessment procedures. In 1985, Sue Gregory was successful in obtaining funding including an RACV Sir Edmund Herring Scholarship for a study tour of driver assessment practices in North America. She was accompanied by Eric Montgomery from The Driving Education Centre of Australia (DECA), who was also interested in the development of systems
to ensure driver safety following accident or illness. Sue saw the opportunity for occupational therapists to develop and lead the field in Australia through development of standard procedures for assessment, which she had noted were missing in North America. When reflecting back on this time, Sue mused ‘… [what we were doing] it was visionary, but at the time we were just doing what we were doing …’ (personal communication, 29 August, 2005).

Subsequently, a Driving for the Disabled Committee was formed within the Victorian Association of Occupational Therapists who worked together to develop a course to train specialist occupational therapists in driver assessment and rehabilitation (described below) and lobbied relevant political groups to include occupational therapists as assessors of disabled drivers. The Committee was able to take advantage of the fact that the Road Safety Act was to be reviewed, and, in what we can now view as a profession-shaping achievement, the Committee was successful in having occupational therapists included in the class of persons able to assess ‘disabled drivers’ in Section 27 (Regulation 229) of the 1988 regulations of the Road Safety Act 1986 (Victoria). Sue remembers the development of the driver assessment and rehabilitation field as being a ‘… very collaborative effort to grow it … it was real teamwork. We had a vision and [we wanted to achieve something in this field] for the profession …’ (personal communication, 29 August, 2005).

At this time, occupational therapists ensured the growth of the field by working on the ‘AAOT working party on driving for the disabled’, and kept assessors up-to-date through circulation of a newsletter developed by Trudy Scott in 1988 titled Backseat Driver. In 1989, Sue Gregory’s contribution to the development of driver assessment was recognised through her nomination by the Australian Association of Occupational Therapists to the World Health Organization as an expert on driver assessment and rehabilitation field as being a ‘… very collaborative effort to grow it … it was real teamwork. We had a vision and [we wanted to achieve something in this field] for the profession …’ (personal communication, 29 August, 2005).

Establishment of a driver assessment and rehabilitation training program

Although occupational therapists were broadly classified in the Road Safety Act (1986) as able to assess ‘disabled drivers’, only occupational therapists who have undertaken post-graduate training in driver assessment are able to perform this task. Sue Gregory trained as a driving instructor in 1986 in order to assess clients. However, it seemed more efficient to develop a course to train occupational therapists to sit in the backseat of the vehicle and observe the driver rather than train occupational therapists as instructors. An instructor seated beside the driver would then be responsible for ensuring vehicle safety. The first ‘Occupational Therapy Driving Assessment Course’ in the world was offered in February 1987 through Bethesda Hospital, DECA and the Victorian Association of Occupational Therapists (VAOT) (VAOT Annual Report, 1987). The course cost $A200 with a $A90 fee for resources, and ran for 2.5 days in Melbourne and 7.5 days in Shepparton at DECA. Sue Gregory recalls the intensity of demand for training requiring the course to run five times in the first year (personal communication, 29 August, 2005). Although driver rehabilitation programs had been running in the USA since the early 1930s, the first Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialist certification was not conferred until 1988 (Stav, 2004). In late 1987, the course was relocated to the School of Occupational Therapy, Lincoln Institute (which became La Trobe University the following year) and was run jointly with DECA. In 1990/1991, the ownership of all course materials was transferred to La Trobe University, and the course was fully revised by Robin Lovell and Marilyn Di Stefano in the mid-1990s and re-named the Driver Education and Rehabilitation Course. Over the ensuing 15 years, the course has educated more than 100 occupational therapists from all over Australia (and internationally).

Procedures and standards for driver assessment and rehabilitation in Victoria

The first occupational therapy driver assessment clinic opened at Bethesda in 1985, and was rapidly followed by Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Hospital, Caulfield General Medical Centre and Hampton Hospital as increasing numbers of therapists were trained. However, to increase uniformity in service provision it became apparent that standards for practice were required. In 1993, the Driver Management Committee was established from the Driving Special Interest Group of the VAOT (now OT AUSTRALIA – Victoria), with Cheryl Schneider as the chair. Cheryl had recognised the need for standards of practice and successfully obtained funding from the OT Trust Fund to develop these. Leanne Healy was appointed as the project officer, and an expert working party was formed. Following a review process, the first edition of the Competency standards for occupational therapy driver assessors was published in 1998 by OT AUSTRALIA – Victoria. These Standards were validated through a process of reviewing the performance of clinicians undertaking assessments (Cheryl Schneider, personal communication, 30 September, 2005). However, as Cheryl notes, a mechanism to evaluate clinician performance against the standards was required, and this is yet to be developed. The Standards were followed in 2000 by ‘Resources and Guidelines for Occupational Therapy Driver Assessors’
and effectiveness of driver retraining for persons with conduct. To conduct a longitudinal study to survey the outcome and validity of an off-road cognitive assessment, research priorities in the field were to: research the reliability and occupational therapists clear directions to enable consistent and objective assessment of drivers.

The Standards (OT AUSTRALIA – Victoria, 1998) specify that an off-road assessment is conducted prior to an assessment (where appropriate) of the client on the road. Dr Wendy Macdonald (School of Human Biosciences, La Trobe University) has made a large contribution to the development of both on- and off-road test procedures, and compiled a comprehensive report on driver assessor practices commissioned by VicRoads titled Disabled Driver Test (Macdonald, 1993–1996), which was reviewed by the Driver Management group of the VAOT (VAOT Annual Report, 1995). In 1986, Sue Gregory and Shelley McLaren, among others, worked with John Fabre, Vin Lawrie and RTA staff (now VicRoads) to develop the early versions of the on- and off-road recording forms. In addition, therapists needed a standard form for submitting client assessment details and findings to VicRoads. Cheryl Schneider recalls identifying the need to make the reporting process more efficient while adhering to medicolegal requirements and therefore attempted to streamline the recording process through development of an online reporting process (Cheryl Schneider, personal communication, 30 September, 2005). Although this was ultimately not possible, Cheryl and Russell Scott were able to develop the current two-page version of the occupational therapy reporting form which was then reviewed and endorsed by the Driving Special Interest Group (available from www.vicroads.vic.gov.au).

Research

The first article on driver assessment and training to appear in the Australian Occupational Therapy Journal was concerned with ‘Teaching the disabled adolescent to drive’ (Gregory, 1985). However, research by occupational therapists in the field has been slow to progress, with relatively few papers published in the Journal over the past 20 years. In an undated memo (ca 1988) from Sue Gregory (driver assessor course coordinator) to Glenys French (then Head of School of Occupational Therapy, La Trobe University), Sue noted the research priorities in the field were to: research the reliability and validity of an off-road cognitive assessment; research the reliability and validity of an on-road assessment; and conduct a longitudinal study to survey the outcome and effectiveness of driver retraining for persons with brain damage. Nearly 20 years later, these research aims remain largely unfulfilled. The challenge for those of us researching or working clinically in this field is to work collaboratively towards fulfilling these research goals. Nationally, at least six occupational therapists are completing higher degrees in the area of driving, and occupational therapy research teams have been established at several universities.

Summary and conclusion

Twenty years have passed since the occupational specialty area of driver assessment was developed in Melbourne, Victoria. During this time, countless occupational therapists have volunteered their time and expertise to develop what is now informally regarded as international best practice in the field. In order to advance driver assessment and rehabilitation in Victoria, clinicians and researchers alike need to ‘take stock’ by reflecting on the history and development of the field and set common goals for the future. This In Practice has documented the development of occupational therapy driver assessment and rehabilitation in Victoria, and acknowledges the work of some of the key contributors in the area. In conclusion, occupational therapists in the field are urged to rise to the challenge...
laid down by the recent Parliamentary enquiry (Road Safety Committee, 2003) and research current assessment procedures, to ensure the continued viability of the field.

Acknowledgments

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References


