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Families welcome the unexpected benefits of telehealth

Delegates to Occupational Therapy Australia's (OTA) 2020 Virtual OT Exchange have been told that the shift to telehealth during COVID-19 has increased access and choice for clients.

"When Covid-19 hit, within 48 hours we went from providing 100 percent face-to-face services to 100 percent telehealth," Mrs Hannah Dunn, director of D.O.T.S Occupational Therapy for Children, said.

After moving her Melbourne-based private practice online in March, Mrs Dunn began investigating how the transition had impacted families and therapists.

189 families completed a survey asking them to report on their experience of shifting to telehealth, both at this particular practice and more broadly. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 14 staff members who had provided telehealth services during the pandemic.

Quantitative data included clinic statistics on cancellation rates, sick days and number of appointments completed per day.

"Access to paediatric occupational therapy can see families on waitlists for up to six months or more," Mrs Dunn noted.

"With telehealth, we were able to increase the number of available appointments and also saw a reduction in sick days and cancellations."

Other reported benefits included:

- Reductions in travel;
- Decreased need to find care for other siblings;
- Increased focus during sessions;
- Greater parent engagement in therapy; and
- Increased independence of clients.

Therapists could also view the child's home environment without the increased cost of a home visit.

"Families want the flexibility of telehealth," Mrs Dunn concluded.

"While it doesn't replace face-to-face therapy, there is an ongoing role for this model of occupational therapy service delivery."

Overall, 103 families reported wanting to return to face-to-face services. 85, however, indicated that they would like to continue using telehealth, either exclusively or combined with face-to-face sessions.

Approximately 500 occupational therapists have converged – virtually – on the 2020 OT Exchange, the first of OTA's national conferences to be delivered entirely online.

The conference features 93 scientific presentations and three workshops focussed on four key areas of occupational therapy practice: Driving, Rehabilitation, Paediatrics and Environmental Modifications. It runs from 14 to 15 September.

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About Occupational Therapy Australia

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