How is functional cognition assessed in acute care with patients who have sustained a traumatic brain injury?

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Introduction: Functional cognition is “the ability to use and integrate thinking and performance skills to accomplish everyday activities” (Giles et al., 2017 p.1). Deficits in functional cognition following traumatic brain injury (TBI) impact on returning to previous occupational roles. Accurate assessment of functional cognition by occupational therapists in acute care is vital for discharge planning and early rehabilitation. A scoping review of assessments of functional cognition was completed, followed by a survey of Australian occupational therapists.

Scoping review: A search of 5 databases identified 3574 articles for examination. Results indicated that occupational therapists have a long history of observing performance of tasks and interpreting a patient’s cognitive deficits and functional implications. Performance-based testing (PBT) using real-world activities in real-world environments is recommended as the best way to comprehensively assess functional cognition. A total of 25 assessments of functional cognition were identified as suitable for use in acute care TBI.

Survey aim: To determine what assessments Australian occupational therapists are using when assessing functional cognition in acute care following TBI. What are the challenges faced in implementing PBT of functional cognition.

Method: An online survey of Australian occupational therapists who work in acute TBI in 2020. Participants were recruited via professional networks and associations.

Survey results:
- 81 responses were received with 82% from Qld.
- Mean years of experience working in TBI was 2.6 years (SD =1.3).
- Most frequently used assessments included non-standardised assessment of functional tasks (95%), carer report (92%) and the Montreal Cognitive Assessment MoCA (89%).
- Respondents generally agreed with the use of PBT, 89% felt confident analysing task performance for underlying cognitive deficits.
- Barriers for PBT include lack of time and expectations to provide standardised cognitive test scores.
- Enablers for PBT included access to a ward kitchenette, use of route-finding assessments within the hospital and access to a patient’s own electronic devices for bedside assessments.

Conclusion: The survey results provide increased understanding of the assessments used in practice and the challenges faced in translating knowledge into practice. Qualitative interviews with occupational therapists in Australia will continue in 2021. Once identified, barriers to improving occupational therapy practice in assessment of functional cognition may be addressed by clinicians, managers, educators and researchers working in acute care TBI.

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