

# Understanding the Discharge Process for the Practitioner



**A**ssessment and intervention may be the two aspects of treatment most stressed in the training and education of an occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant. After all, they take up the bulk of care. But, of equal importance is discharge planning – determining when, where and under what circumstances a patient will leave the facility. Every OT and COTA should understand the discharge process and his/her role in it so as to provide the best quality continuum of care possible.

## IT TAKES A TEAM

While discharge decisions may ultimately fall to an assigned discharge planner, whose title and overall duties will vary within each facility, no one person ever decides alone that a patient is ready for discharge. The following practitioners/individuals are an integral part of the process:

- Nurses
- Nurse Case Managers
- Doctors
- Occupational Therapists
- Physical Therapists
- Speech-Language Pathologists
- Nutritionists
- Social Workers
- Family members
- The patient

All of the above will weigh in with their own expertise to help guide the patient through discharge planning and ensure that the end result is a plan that will lead to the best, safest, and healthiest solution.

## WHERE OT STEPS IN

Taking into account the large number of individuals consulted prior to discharge, what do occupational therapy practitioners have to offer? After all, the doctors and nurses are best aware of the patient's overall health, and the social workers and case managers know more about aftercare options, insurance, and transportation. What does that leave? As it happens, a lot.

Occupational therapists offer critical insight into the following aspects of discharge planning:

*Patient's functional independence* – The OT and OTA have been working with the patient throughout his/her stay to increase mobility, ADLs, strength and other functions needed for day-to-day living. Thus the OT and OTA can offer the best opinion about the patient's ability to function independently or, if dependently, at what level of care. For example, the patient may require assisted living or may be able to return home provided all necessities – bathroom, kitchen, bedroom – are on the first floor.

*Home assessment* – Since the OT and OTA know what type of care/assistance is needed, if the patient is planning or hoping to return home, the OT can assess the living arrangements, whether through visit or conversation. The accommodations and other individuals living in the home will be a sign of whether such a discharge plan is a possible – a sign that, most likely, only the OT/OTA will best understand.

*Training* – Should the patient return home, both he/she and his/her family will require training prior to discharge. The patient will need to go over any independent functions required of him/her on a day to day basis, such as walking with a walker or climbing stairs. The family members in-home will also need to know how to do transfers and other similar duties. It's the role of the OT to not only help provide that training but also assess whether or not such duties are plausible/possible.

*Referrals* – Will the patient require occupational therapy at home? Will the patient need acute care, sub-acute care or other? The occupational therapist is the only one who can dictate such information.

As seen above, the occupational therapist plays a rather large role in discharge planning. Thus, it is important that he/she remain involved and informed throughout the process. If questions/concerns arise, the medical team should be consulted. Then, each patient should have the discharge plan needed to promote ongoing benefit. ■

## Information for this patient handout was gathered from:

- Western Governors University, Guide to Discharge Planning - <http://www.unm.edu/~dpayment/dow/N424D/pages/GuideToDischargePlanning.pdf>
- EHow, Occupational Therapy in Discharge Planning - [http://www.ehow.com/facts\\_6789388\\_occupational-therapy-discharge-planning.html](http://www.ehow.com/facts_6789388_occupational-therapy-discharge-planning.html)
- American Occupational Therapy Association, Occupational Therapy in Acute Care – <http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/PracticeAreas/Rehab/Tools/43243.aspx?FT=.pdf>