

Promoting support of children with disabilities



Dr Natalie Ong, Developmental Paediatrician and 2020 Fulbright Future Scholar

2021 Avant grant recipient Dr Natalie Ong's project 'Motivated for change' is about promoting intrinsic motivation of healthcare staff to better support children with intellectual disabilities.

As a developmental paediatrician, Dr Ong's interest in research led to the discovery of the significant inequity of young people with intellectual disabilities in terms of healthcare. Her research found that access to health services, the quality of care and the experience of healthcare services was inequitable for children with intellectual disabilities.

One of the elements Dr Ong focused on was how to better deliver training services for healthcare staff from a continuing professional development perspective. Health professionals may make assumptions about what parents feel their child needs or may be dismissive and not have the skills to communicate with the parent's child. Conversely, parents may also not fully understand what it means to have sensory symptoms or become overwhelmed in a crowded and noisy setting.



I was prompted to think about how to deliver a training program in a way that not only increases knowledge and skills, but the motivation to implement what's learned."

Training program shows benefits

This project is a continuing professional development and quality improvement activity which looks at the patient journey and where the touch points are, while also examining what works and what doesn't work. Not only does it improve a health professional's knowledge, but the goal is to motivate them to use that knowledge in their clinical setting.

Benefits included parents noticing changes in the way that staff were interacting with the children.

"This included how they were setting up and preparing for the hospital visit or their mission," Dr Ong explains. "Other noticeable changes were things like minimising noise and crowded areas, so reducing the number of people the staff spoke to and how many engaged with the children. They also thought outside the box, like employing play therapists to distract the child."

"I have since embarked on a PhD to develop a patient safety education curriculum based on this project," Dr Ong says. "I happened to interview a staff member from the earlier stages of the research who still remembers

the training program and had positive things to say years down the track. People still remember what they learned and are continuing to implement lessons from the session. It was rewarding to hear and that's what keeps us going."

Research aims

Dr Ong says one of the key findings was on staff communication skills when it comes to engaging parents.

"For example, parents may feel bad if there was an incident, so perhaps questions around the child's disability could be framed more sensitively," Dr Ong says.

"This program is about promoting intrinsic motivation for change, so it's not us telling you what to do or what you need to know about caring for disability," she says. "We bring in the disability perspectives on what the needs are. But you, as the expert in your discipline, would come up with your own ideas as to how you can make these reasonable adjustments in your workplace."

"I find that is far more powerful and sustainable because if it is an idea that's from within, then you are more likely to do it. You are more likely to make the change longer lasting as well," Dr Ong says.