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Professional development grants support greater independence for people in the country

People with disabilities and medical conditions in the Great Southern, Esperance and Karratha now have greater support to drive thanks to driver-trained occupational therapist Emma Tozana, co-founder of Functional Revival in Albany.

Over the past few years, Emma has accessed funding through the Health Workforce Scholarship Program to become an Advanced Driver-Trained Occupational Therapist (DTOT).

An DTOT works with clients to assess their capacity or fitness to drive from a medical perspective, both off-road (in the clinic) and on-road (in a vehicle). An Advanced Driver-Trained Occupational Therapist helps clients to manage their medical conditions which may limit their ability to drive across the spectrums of license classes from a private car to heavy vehicle, or even to ride a motorcycle.

“We use a combination of high-level cognitive, visual and physical processes to drive. A perfect unison of these faculties is vital for successfully executing the driving task. At times, a disability, injury, or progressive medical condition affects our ability to drive,” said Emma.

“Driver rehabilitation is an intervention focused approach to help clients learn to manage their conditions so that they are able to drive safely.

“For someone with cognitive challenges or impairment, it is important they recognise that there are not fixed rules when driving and they need to learn how to problem solve in different scenarios.”

As an OT driver assessor, Emma may recommend vehicle modifications that assist someone to drive or continue to drive, such as people with amputations or reduced physical functioning.

Emma said that GPs and Geriatricians might refer experienced drivers with conditions such as Dementia or Parkinson’s Disease or clients who are recovering from a stroke to determine their fitness to drive. Novice drivers with cerebral palsy, autism or epilepsy might also be referred to Emma for assessment through the NDIS.

“Driver assessment and training is recognised as an advanced scope of practice by Occupational Therapy Australia, and these services can only be provided by therapists with post-graduate driver qualifications.

“Previously there was no one who lived in the region who was qualified to undertake these assessments and clients who required OT driving assessments needed to travel to Perth for evaluation.

“Undertaking this training has meant I can provide a service to the local community, where they can be assessed on roads familiar to them and avoid the stress of traffic density and conditions which don’t really exist in the country.”

With few other providers across rural Western Australia, Emma has also been asked to travel to locations such as Karratha, Esperance and Port Hedland to provide assessment services.

“I’ve been contacted by NDIS service coordinators in other regions to support their clients close to home.

“Many rural areas have minimal public transport or taxi services, so the ability to drive is also the ability to participate and connect with community.

“For many clients, being able to drive or getting back on the road is critical to their independence and it has a real ripple effect. Having your licence improves your job prospects and that in turn improves their economic participation, and provides an overall positive benefit to their health and happiness.”

Emma has also completed her additional certification in driving instructors course.

“As the only Driver-Trained OT in the Great Southern and Esperance regions, I am finding it challenging to find driving instructors to work with to ensure the full clinical and on-road assessments, and further driver rehabilitation can be completed.

“To overcome this, I have completed the driving instructors course so if I do indeed find myself short of options from local driving instructors. Or if I am going to remote locations such as Karratha or Esperance - I can provide the full assessment without barriers.”

Emma praised the financial support she received through the Health Workforce Scholarship Program with assisting her to provide these vital services to her community.

“I am eternally grateful for the ongoing support that Rural Health West have given me - truly amazing.

“I can extend this assistance to our local community in the Great Southern and beyond and will definitely support people to achieve their driving goals and independence, which is certainly critical in a regional and remote country locations.”

ENDS

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Rural Health West aims to improve access to quality healthcare for rural communities through the provision of a highly skilled, motivated and sustainable medical and allied health workforce. We are a not-for-profit organisation primarily funded through the WA Country Health Service and the Australian Government Department of Health.