



**DEMENTIA RESEARCH
NETWORK IRELAND**

Prevention, Cure & Care for
Neurodegenerative Diseases

Researcher In Focus Series – February 2022

This month's Researcher in Focus is Ruth Usher, a lecturer and researcher in the Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy Department in University College Cork.



What is your area of research?

I recently completed my PhD in Trinity College which focused on occupational therapists' role in assessment and support of older adults' decision-making capacity for independent living. Due to increasing ageing populations and associated dementia-related diseases, decision-making capacity is a salient issue. Internationally and nationally, equality and human rights policy and legislation protects and upholds the rights of all adults, including those with dementia, to participate in decisions that may have an impact on their lives, with significant implications for health and social care professionals working with older adults and people with cognitive disabilities. When I began working in this area there was very little published literature, and it has been exciting to see this topic gain increased attention in recent years from various disciplines and perspectives. This multi-phase mixed methods study I conducted provides insight to factors that both challenge and facilitate occupational therapists' engagement in assessing and supporting older adults decision-making capacity for independent living as well as highlighting a potential leadership role for occupational therapy in this multidisciplinary area.

I am also involved in research exploring the support and education needs of family carers of people with dementia in Ireland and their experiences of engaging with support and education over the course of the dementia journey with Ms. Joanne Murphy and Dr. Susan Ryan. This research looks at the unique needs of adults caring for their parents with dementia, and how Irish healthcare services might be improved to better respond to these needs.



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As the quality of care provided to people with dementia can be influenced by factors such as healthcare practitioners' knowledge and attitudes, I am also interested in preparing future healthcare professionals to meet the needs of people with dementia. In addition to being involved in interdisciplinary undergraduate teaching on dementia, I am also involved in research which seeks to explore the knowledge and attitudes of undergraduate occupational therapy students in Ireland regarding older adults with dementia and how progression through undergraduate education, along with personal and practice education experience, can influence this.

What sparked your interest in this area?

I have over 10 years practice experience working with older adults in a range of rehabilitation, respite, and long-term care settings and I did a MSc in Gerontology which further developed my interest in the impact of cognitive changes on our abilities and opportunities to participate in the occupations we need and want to do and how we can support and enable people by improving the fit between occupations (activities and roles), the person's capabilities, and the physical and social environment in which they live in order to optimise participation in valued activities, roles and relationships.

As a clinician, supporting people with cognitive difficulties to live within their communities was often an occupational therapy goal. The challenge of assessing older people's ability to decide to return home, or supporting them to remain at home, was often raised within the multidisciplinary team alongside a growing awareness of the practical implications of new legislation for all those working with older people and indeed for older people themselves. This brought me to commence my PhD research journey as I was interested to see what occupational therapists' current practices were in assessing and supporting decision-making capacity of older adults in Ireland and to explore the practice-based issues arising from changing legislation and policy. I wanted to bring clinicians' perspectives to this complex topic and hope my research will have a practical application.

What stage are you at in your career and are there any achievements you are particularly proud of?

I am an early career researcher having just completed my PhD, which is probably my biggest research achievement to date. I am proud of international and interdisciplinary publications to date (e.g. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07334648211065029>, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13487>) and the reception of the research at various conferences, in addition to interest from clinicians, which has validated the importance of this topic. The research is embedded within practice and findings from this exploratory study provide baseline information and knowledge that can be used to inform the development of resources and guidelines for clinicians to consolidate and advance their practice in this area. Future research using implementation science approaches may be useful in development, implementation and evaluation of resources for practice. I would also like to explore perspectives of older people, and other relevant stakeholders such as family members and supporters, focusing on acceptable and effective approaches to addressing the older person's will and preference to further elaborate on the findings. I am looking forward to forging links with other researchers interested in this area and collaborating with older people, people living with dementia and their supporters as partners in my research projects.



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What impact would you like your research to have?

I hope that my research can contribute to a body of work which will impact the lives of older people, particularly those living with dementia and other neurodegenerative illnesses. As findings highlight systematic issues in the current provision of care options for older people and people with dementia in Ireland, I hope my research may contribute to efforts to improve health and social care services and to the development of education and training programmes for occupational therapists and other healthcare professionals.

Who has helped or inspired you in your area of research?

I have had the privilege of working with many committed and enthusiastic researchers during my PhD journey and career to date. Dr. Tadhg Stapleton provided immense support and guidance as my PhD supervisor, as did many other colleagues in the department of Occupational Therapy in Trinity College. I now enjoy the mentorship and support of my fantastic colleagues in UCC, such as Dr. Eithne Hunt, Dr. Susan Ryan, Dr. Helen Lynch and Prof. Jeanne Jackson. Though from different fields, my cousin Professor Declan Devane and brother Dr. Joe Usher have been inspiring for undertaking impactful research. The many people I have worked with in clinical practice over the years, including people with dementia, their supporters and various passionate clinicians, along with students as healthcare professionals in training, have also provided much inspiration and motivation.

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