165. RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS PATIENTS’ VIEWS OF A VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION INTERVENTION PROVIDED BY RHEUMATOLOGY OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS

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Background: Work disability in RA is common and many are unlikely to return to work once they cease working. Rheumatology occu-
pational therapists (OTs) are well-placed to identify the work problems of people with RA as their role includes evaluating the impact of arthritis on functional ability, work and social roles. This study, nested within a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of a vocational rehabilitation (VR) programme, aimed to explore employed RA patients’ perceptions of the impact of VR or work advice received.

Methods: The VR intervention was modified for use in the UK from an American study. Rheumatology OTs (n=9) attended three-days training in this VR programme delivered by VR experts. Both the intervention and control group received a work advice pack including written information about job modifications, how to access existing VR support and employment rights for people with disabilities. The intervention group also received on average 3 (s.d.: 1.08) hours of VR delivered by a rheumatology OT. At six month follow-up, semi-structured telephone interviews with participants (n=32) were conducted to investigate their views of VR and advice received. These were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed by three researchers to ensure validity.

Results: The majority of participants were still in paid employment. Two different and overarching themes emerged within each group: (i) the intervention group: valued the work advice they received (e.g. pacing, looking after self, changes to work routines, advice on equipment/aids) and highlighted the therapeutic benefit of seeing an OT (ii) the control group: perceived their condition as more debilitating than those in the intervention group, and lacked future aspirations about staying employed. They were unaware of their rights at work, refrained from disclosing their condition to their employers and expressed concerns about taking frequent sick leave, anticipating...
Qualitative interviews were conducted with 38 members of the general public who have not been diagnosed with RA. This study about the perceptions and knowledge of RA amongst members of the public might be coloured by their experiences with the illness since. Little is known about factors that affect help-seeking behaviour, and this research relies on retrospective responses in patients with RA, which suggests that a relatively short intervention provided by rheumatology OTs may help working people with RA stay in work for longer, potentially improving work disability.

Conclusion: Working people with RA receiving VR delivered by rheumatology OTs in this trial found it helped them learn how to manage their condition at work, and understand their employment rights. Comparing to those who only received a written advice, they were more optimistic about staying employed in the future. This study suggests that a relatively short intervention provided by rheumatology OTs may help working people with RA stay in work for longer, potentially improving work disability.

Disclosure statement: The authors have declared no conflicts of interest.

This study is the first to investigate barriers and drivers to help seeking in working people with RA receiving VR delivered by rheumatology OTs. We identified eight themes which represented barriers of and drivers to help seeking: (i) Participants' perceptions of arthritis and RA; (ii) Knowing someone with arthritis; (iii) Co-morbidity (presence of other long term conditions (LTCs)); (iv) Barriers and drivers related to the actual symptoms (ii) hypothetical RA symptoms were often seen as part of an existing illness); (v) Barriers and drivers related to the healthcare system; (vi) Barriers and drivers related to the patient’s employment situation. For example, whereas for some people pain would be the most important driver to help seeking, for others it would be the knowledge of someone with arthritis or a previous illness; the presence of co-morbidities was also a significant driver. Barriers and drivers can be either a barrier or a driver, depending on the person and the circumstances of their illness. For example, if a person had been diagnosed with RA for some time and found they were not able to continue their job, this might result in job loss. Most participants admitted not to have read the information booklet, which was the only advice received in this study by the control group.

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