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Vocational rehabilitation in workers with inflammatory arthritis

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Abstract

Work disability is high in people with musculoskeletal conditions (MSCs): occurring in 28–40% of people with RA; and 18–31% in AS. Before becoming work disabled, people with MSCs experience considerable work instability, i.e. a mismatch between their abilities and job demands which threatens employment. Better medical treatment for RA and AS means more people should remain in employment. However, increased presenteeism (i.e. reduced at-work productivity) occurs if people are struggling to manage work and their symptoms. Almost a quarter of working people with RA's time at work is lost due to health problems and almost half reduce their pace of work and get help from colleagues. People experience work instability for a variety of reasons including job-related (e.g. unadapted work environments and equipment, physical demands); psychological (e.g. job strain; lack of knowledge/skills requesting job accommodations); and condition factors (e.g. hand function, pain, fatigue). Only a third of employed people have ready access to occupational health. Many with arthritis are unwilling to disclose their condition at work. As a result, many with arthritis may not receive help with work problems in their workplace. Vocational rehabilitation (VR) is a process to overcome barriers to remaining in work. People with RA with workplace ergonomic modifications are 2.5 times less likely to stop work and early interventions can help reduce job loss. However, many employees with arthritis, and employers, are unaware of VR services to help job retention. This presentation will: briefly summarize common work problems experienced by people with inflammatory conditions; review trials evaluating VR in inflammatory conditions; and discuss a feasibility trial evaluating job retention VR for employed people with inflammatory arthritis, provided by Rheumatology occupational therapists. This will include the work assessment used, work problems identified, job accommodations implemented and trial results. Implications for future research and practice will be considered.