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Original Citation

McCluskey, Serena, Burton, A. Kim, Brooks, Joanna and King, Nigel (2010) The influence of significant others on back pain disability and return-to-work: a qualitative pilot study of illness perceptions. In: European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology, 29-31 March 2010, Rome, Italy. (Unpublished)

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The influence of significant others on back pain disability and return-to-work: a qualitative pilot study of illness perceptions

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Background

Whilst there is extensive evidence that work is generally good for health¹, there is little understanding of the individual and social influences involved in the everyday life experiences of those with disabling back pain which may act as obstacles to recovery, and ultimately, a return-to-work.

It is now widely accepted that the biopsychosocial model provides the best framework for the modern management of back pain.

The biopsychosocial model considers:

- The person
- Their health problem
- Their social/occupational context

What are illness perceptions?

Illness perceptions have been defined as common-sense beliefs about illness², and have been acknowledged as important influences in the course of, and recovery from, back pain^{3,4}. However, there is less understanding of the influence of the illness perceptions of close family members, or 'significant others'.

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Method

A convenience sample (n=5) of Incapacity Benefit/Employment Support Allowance claimants, along with their 'significant others' will be selected from the Lancashire Condition Management Program. Participants will be interviewed following a schedule derived from the Illness Perception Questionnaire⁵ and the Work and Social Function Scale⁶.

The core dimensions are related to:

illness identity (including symptoms and label),

What are the defining features of your condition?

perceived cause,

Was there any difficulty in deciding what was wrong?

expectations about timeline (how long the illness is expected to last),

What do you think might be the course of your condition in the future?

consequences of the illness,

Which of your activities have been most affected by your condition?

beliefs about curability and control.

To what extent, if at all, can you control and manage your condition?

Data will be analysed using template analysis⁷, and themes extracted will be:

- examined in relation to scores on the questionnaires (to check for correlation and to expand on salient aspects of questionnaire components), and;
- compared between claimants and their 'significant others' to establish any possible influences (both on claimant questionnaire scores and interview data).

Summary

The influence of 'significant others' in this illness experience is largely unexplored, and it is hoped that the findings from this pilot study will not only increase understanding in this area, but help provide information which will enable family members to be usefully involved in return-to-work programs.