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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 pain³⁴. However, there is less understanding of the influence of the illness perceptions of close family members, or ‘significant others’.

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),
- perceived cause,
- expectations about timeline (how long the illness is expected to last),
- consequences of the illness,
- beliefs about curability and control.

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.

References

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