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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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BackCare and Lancashire Condition Management Programme (NHS Blackburn with Darwen)

Conflicts of interest: None**Dr Serena McCluskey:**

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Background

While 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. Illness perceptions (defined as the 'common sense beliefs' about illness²) have been acknowledged as important influences in the course of,

and recovery from, back pain^{3,4}. However, an in-depth exploration of the influence of illness perceptions, particularly those of 'significant others', on back pain incapacity has yet to be carried out. This pilot study has been jointly funded by BackCare and Lancashire Condition Management Programme (NHS Blackburn with Darwen), and will be carried out over a 9-month period commencing Spring 2010.



Objectives

The aims of this pilot study are:

- 1) to design and test the feasibility of a semi-structured interview for incapacity benefit claimants and their 'significant others' to explore their illness perceptions in relation to the claimant's back condition and work function;
- 2) to compare the beliefs of claimants and their significant others with a view to designing a large-scale mixed-methods research project exploring the impact of significant others' beliefs on claimants' own beliefs about their disability and work function.

Method

A convenience sample of Incapacity Benefit/Employment Support Allowance claimants, along with their 'significant others' (n=10) will be recruited from the Lancashire Condition Management Programme. Participants will be interviewed following a schedule derived from the Illness Perception Questionnaire⁵ and the Work and Social Function Scale⁶. The core dimensions of the questionnaires 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, and perceptions of disability.

Sufficient qualitative data will be obtained from in-depth interviews with ten participants, and will be analysed using template analysis⁷. Themes extracted will primarily be:

- examined in relation to scores on the questionnaires (to check for similarity and to expand on salient aspects of questionnaire components)
- compared between claimants and their 'significant others' to establish



any possible influences (both on claimant questionnaire scores and interview data).

Summary

To date, research carried out with individuals experiencing disabling back pain has largely been quantitative in nature, and has focused on the economic burden on employers and society generated by sickness absence and benefit claims. The proposed study aims to redress this imbalance, and will attempt to provide a method which will enable more in-depth data to be collected from people with disabling

back pain, exploring the context of their illness with the hope of better understanding specific psychosocial mechanisms. Back pain research involving 'significant others' is rare, 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 programmes. ●

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