

THE COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF BACK SCHOOLS FOR OCCUPATIONAL LOW BACK PAIN; DESIGN OF A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL.

Heymans, M.W.^{1,2}, De Vet, H.C.W.¹, Bongers, P.M.², Koes, B.W.³, Van Mechelen W.¹.

¹Institute for Research in Extramural Medicine, "Vrije Universiteit" Medical Centre, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

²TNO, Work and Employment, Hoofddorp, The Netherlands.

³Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Aims:

The current study aims to answer the question about the cost-effectiveness of back schools of low and high intensity respectively, compared with usual care, in an occupational setting.

Objectives:

Low back pain is an important reason for work absence and work disability. Most people who are on sick leave due to low back pain return to work within 4 weeks. A small number is at risk to develop chronic low back pain and prolonged duration of sick leave. This small group accounts for most of the high direct and indirect medical costs. In a Cochrane review by Van Tulder et al (2000) about the efficacy of back school interventions it was concluded that high intensive interventions are effective in an occupational setting. These interventions are a modification of the less intensive Swedisch Back School introduced in the 1970s, which at that time consisted of only four "lessons". The cost-effectiveness of both low and high intensive back school interventions is unknown.

Methods:

In this study 300 employees who are sick listed between 3 and 6 weeks due to low back pain are randomly allocated to one of the following conditions:

Group A: Usual care group. This group receives regular treatment by the primary, as well as occupational physician.

Group B: Low intensity back school, consisting of educational sessions and a low intensity exercise programme. This back school programme is based on the original Swedisch Back School programme of 4 sessions.

Group C: High intensity back school, consisting of educational sessions and intensive exercise programmes based on the principles of "graded activity". Duration of this back school programme is 8 weeks, twice a week.

Outcome measures are work absence, functional disability, pain intensity, kinesiophobia, general health status, and medical consumption. For the cost-effectiveness analysis, the direct and indirect medical costs, and indirect costs due to loss productivity, will be measured.

Outcome measurements are scheduled at baseline and during the follow-up period (3, 6 and 12 months after baseline).

Results:

The recruitment of eligible employees started September 2000; until now 14 have been included in the study.