

New research into chronic condition reveals long-term cost to UK economy

September 15 2011

Myalgic Encephalopathy [ME] or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome [CFS] causes severe debilitating fatigue and affects up to 2.6 per cent of adults in Britain. New University of Bristol research, published today [15 Sep], into the impact of the illness on employment and productivity has estimated lost earnings of over £102 million a year to the UK economy.

The study, published in the journal BMC Health Services Research and led by academics at the University's School of Social and Community Medicine, is one of the first to have investigated factors associated with discontinuation of employment in patients with ME or CFS or quantified its impact on productivity.

Sufferers from ME or CFS experience persistent or recurrent debilitating fatigue. In many cases, people are housebound or confined to their bed for months or years, causing their lives to change drastically and continued employment to become impossible.

Funded by the National Institute for Health Research [NIHR] and Action for M.E. charity, the study examined data from 2,170 patients attending five specialist ME/CFS services to estimate earnings lost as a consequence of ME or CFS and the overall productivity costs to the UK economy.

The productivity costs among the 2,170 patients, estimated using average annual earnings data by sex and age group obtained from the Office for National Statistics, were equivalent to £44,515 (in men) per patient and

£16,130 (in women) per patient. By extrapolating these estimates to the UK population, the researchers estimated that each year 4,424 working age adults with ME or CFS might be referred for specialist assessment, and that this group would have already incurred productivity costs of £102.2 million due to their illness by the time of the assessment.

Many ME or CFS sufferers continue to work despite the primary (fatigue and pain) and secondary effects (depression and anxiety) of the condition. Loss of physical capacity is the main reason for discontinuation of employment.

Dr Esther Crawley, lead author and Consultant Senior Lecturer at the University, said: "Our findings are important because they show the long-term cost to society, which must be accounted for in estimates of the cost-effectiveness of ME or CFS interventions and service provision.

"In addition to this indirect cost to the UK economy, health resource use and welfare payments impose direct costs, and families of patients must bear the costs of informal care, often reducing their own working hours. In young adults, disruption of education reduces productivity in later years. Above and beyond these financial costs, ME or CFS has a huge impact on quality of life. "

Sir Peter Spencer, CEO of Action for M.E., who welcomed these research findings, commented: "The key message for the Government and for the Department of Health is that the financial costs of failing to address this illness properly are much greater than the money required to set up proper NHS specialist services in all areas and to fund much needed scientific research.

"In addition to the moral imperative, there is clearly a powerful economic argument for addressing the needs of this greatly neglected patient group."

Colin Barton, Chair, Sussex and Kent ME/CFS Society, added: "There is an urgent need for more adequate NHS provision for those affected by this often life-ruining illness that is costing so much."

More information: The study entitled 'The impact of CFS/ME on employment and productivity in the UK: a cross-sectional study based on CFS/ME National Outcomes Database' by Simon Collin, Esther Crawley, Margaret May, Jonathan Sterne and William Hollingworth is published in the journal *BMC Health Services Research*, funded by the National Institute for Health Research [NIHR] and co-funded by Action for M.E.

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: New research into chronic condition reveals long-term cost to UK economy (2011, September 15) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-09-chronic-condition-reveals-long-term-uk.html>

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