Hand exercises improve function in rheumatoid arthritis patients

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A new study led by Professor Sallie Lamb of and the University of Warwick and the Nuffield Department of Orthopaedics, Rheumatology and Musculoskeletal Sciences, Oxford University, is published today in *The Lancet* and shows a tailored hand exercise programme improves function and quality of life for patients living with Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA).

RA affects more than 400,000 people in the UK, of whom about 80% have hand and wrist problems, and this has a substantial impact on quality of life, function and productivity. The new strengthening and stretching exercise programme developed for the study is a worthwhile, low cost intervention to adopt alongside medication.

The Strengthening And Stretching For Rheumatoid Arthritis of the Hand (SARAH) trial evaluated the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of adding an individually tailored, progressive exercise programme for the hands and upper limbs in addition to usual care.

Approximately 80% of the patients using the SARAH programme alongside their medication, reported improvement of hand function a year after starting the programme. Significant improvements in strength and dexterity were also seen for patients performing the exercise programme.

Mark Williams, Research Fellow at NDORMS, says: "Current best practice mandates medication regimens, which substantially improve
control of disease activity and joint damage, but don't always impact on disability and health related quality of life. By adding an optimised exercise programme for hands and upper limbs to usual care for patients with RA, we can addresses key issues of this debilitating condition to help patients in their daily lives."

Professor Karen Middleton, chief executive of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, added: "This study demonstrates the significant improvement physiotherapy can make to the quality of life of people with long-term conditions. Growing numbers of people are living with at least one of these conditions, so new interventions such as this will be invaluable as the NHS looks to address that rising demand within restrained budgets. This proactive approach enables people to manage their own condition and lead full and active lives while cutting costs for the NHS and social care."

As part of the study, the team developed a manual that describes the treatment programme developed for the SARAH trial. The manual is designed to guide hand therapists through the SARAH exercise programme with detailed descriptions of the different elements. Whilst patients are welcome to have a look at this, the next step is for the team to work on how the exercise programme can be implemented into clinical practice and for patients to have easy access to this treatment.

Over 450 patients from 17 NHS trusts were part of the Strengthening And Stretching For Rheumatoid Arthritis of the Hand (SARAH) trial. All people who entered the trial received joint protection advice, with half of all people in the study also undertaking the daily exercise programme for the hands and arms.

Provided by University of Warwick