

UK study to help chronic pain sufferers back to work

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Researchers from the University of Warwick's Medical School are leading a novel study to explore ways of helping people with chronic pain back to work.

Working with employers they will design a package of care and support for people who are out of work because of chronic pain. They aim to overcome the obstacles to getting back to work faced by both [chronic pain patients](#) and employers.

The team from Warwick Medical School will be working with Serco, Coventry City Council, and University Hospitals Birmingham, as well as with other researchers from Royal Holloway University of London, and an expert advisor to the Department of Work and Pensions.

Leading the research team is Senior Research Fellow at Warwick Medical School, Dr Robert Froud. He said: "Chronic pain affects between 8% and 60% of the population, depending on the definition used. It costs the UK economy billions each year and can have an enormous impact on individuals financially, socially, and physically. However working is known to improve health outcomes, reduce poverty, and improve quality of life and well-being."

The study will be using a type of support package, known as Individual Placement Support (IPS), as the basis of their research. The IPS has previously been used with people unemployed with [mental health problems](#) with some success. The Warwick team will adapt this type of

package of care so that it can be also used for people with chronic pain.

Serco, Coventry City Council and University Hospital Birmingham will be providing a total of 30 work placements for the people in the study. Existing NHS and expert support will be provided to both the employees and the employers. If the scheme is successful there will be potential for national roll-out in the future, which could help millions of people in their battle against pain.

Evidence suggests that without intervention the probability of return-to-work in the foreseeable future drops from 50% after six months off-work, to 10% after 12 months, and to zero at 24 months.

Chronic pain is seldom confined to one part of the body which this may present unique challenges to patients. People who are unemployed due to chronic pain face slightly different obstacles to returning to work than those with mental health problems in the absence of chronic pain. For example, people with [chronic musculoskeletal pain](#) may need specific adjustments to allow them to perform their role (e.g. adapting a work station, or modifying access). Study participants will be assessed and interventional support will be provided not only to the person in pain, but also to their manager. It is anticipated that work placements will increase participants' confidence in both their ability to work and returning to work. The feasibility study will commence in July 2017.

Much of the chronic pain in the study will be caused by arthritis and arthritis-related conditions therefore the study is funded by Arthritis Research UK. Dr Natalie Carter, Head of Research Liaison and Evaluation at Arthritis Research UK, said: "Millions of people live with the [chronic pain](#) of back pain and other types of arthritis, and they tell us that they desperately want to return to work.

"This study will not only help us to determine what support is needed to

help those people return to work but will also have a knock on effect for the UK economy, as arthritis-related conditions account for the second biggest reason for work place absence.

"As a charity, we are not only focused on finding future treatments but also helping those living in pain now. That's why we are determined to help those living with arthritis push back the limits of their condition so they can continue, or return to, doing the things that they love whatever that may be."

Gareth Moss, Serco's Director for Employment, Skills and Enterprise, said: "Our employment business focuses on supporting and empowering people to secure sustainable work and progress in their careers, and to do this effectively we take into account any health concerns. We are therefore delighted to be working with the University of Warwick on exploring new ways to help transform people's lives."

Provided by University of Warwick

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