An investigation into the effects of the economic downturn on incident cases of mental health and musculoskeletal disorders, as reported to a UK-wide surveillance scheme for work-related illness

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ABSTRACT

Background: The UK entered an economic recession in 2008. Research has shown that a recession can have a negative impact on the health of both unemployed individuals and those who remain in employment.

Aims: To investigate incident case reporting of work-related musculoskeletal and psychological disorders to a voluntary UK-wide surveillance scheme, The Health and Occupation Research (THOR) network, across a time period covering the latest downturn in the UK’s economy.

Method: This descriptive cross-sectional study analysed data collected in two time periods; 01/01/2006-31/12/2007 (period 1) and 01/01/2008-31/12/2009 (period 2). THOR databases were analysed for all musculoskeletal disorders and for specific categories, namely upper limb disorders and neck/back disorders. Reporting to THOR of all psychological disorders, and specific categories (anxiety/depression and “work-related stress”) were also studied. Further analysis of patterns of reporting by two groups of clinicians (occupational physicians (OPs) and general practitioners (GPs)) was carried out in relation to workers’ demographics and employment sector. The Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to assess statistical significance.

Results: Reporting by clinical specialists and OPs of all musculoskeletal disorders, upper limb and neck/back disorders and of all psychological disorders, anxiety/depression and “work-related stress” to THOR schemes showed no statistically significant changes across the time periods studied. However, reporting by GPs showed a statistically significant fall for both musculoskeletal and psychological diagnoses from time period 1 to period 2. Analysis by age, gender and employment sector for cases reported by OPs showed a statistically significant reduction in reporting in those aged 31-45 years (but not for other age groups) in the categories all musculoskeletal and all psychological disorders. For cases reported by GPs, there was a statistically significant fall in musculoskeletal diagnoses for both genders, all age groups and in all employment sectors. GPs’ reporting for all psychological diagnoses showed a statistically significant falls between the two
time periods in females (but not in males), among those aged 31-45 years, and for public (but not private) sector workers. GPs’ reports of “work-related stress” showed statistically significant falls among male (but not female) cases, among those aged 31-45 years and in public (but not private) sector employees.

**Conclusion:** Investigating case reporting to THOR around the time of a recession provides some insight into the effects of socioeconomic factors on work-related ill-health; however many other factors (for example employees’ behaviour such as presenteeism) also need to be considered in an overall analysis.