Perception of illness and its impact on sickness absence

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ABSTRACT

Aims: Patients’ perception of their illness is a key determinant of functional recovery 1. A prospective cross-sectional self-reported questionnaire based study was undertaken to compare the perceptions of illness and fitness to return to work of patients who were off sick with that of their occupational health physicians (OHPs).

Subjects and methods: The study was undertaken in three NHS departments of occupational health in the West Midlands. Patients who had been off sick for more than two weeks and who had been referred by a manager were recruited to the study and followed for 3 months. Both the patients and their OHPs completed similar questionnaires which were modifications of the validated Brief Illness Perception Questionnaire2 with additional questions about causality of illness, obstacles to return to work, necessity of job modification and date of return to work.

Results: 84 patients and nine OHPs participated in the study. Patients perceived they had a stronger “illness identity” (p<0.01); their “illness would last longer” (p<0.01); more “concern about their illness” (p<0.01); their illness had a greater “emotional impact” (p<0.01); more serious “consequences” (p<0.01); and their “illness was more serious” (p<0.01) than their OHPs. Patients were better predictors of when they could return to work than their OHPs (p<0.01).

Patients who returned to work believed that their “illness was shorter-lasting” (p<0.01), had a stronger “belief of a cure” (p<0.01) or “controllability” of their illness (p<0.02) and a weaker “illness identity” (p<0.05) than those who failed to return to work.

Conclusion: Positive illness perception by the patients was associated with an earlier return to work. Unhelpful negative beliefs about illness need to be addressed by the OHP to achieve an earlier return to work. Negative perception may be a greater obstacle to returning to work than the illness itself.
