Optimizing employment and preventing job loss

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Multiple Sclerosis (MS) affects approximately 130,000 people in the United Kingdom, and 700,000 people in Europe. It is typically diagnosed in the prime working years of adult life. The symptoms are diverse and complex affecting both physical and cognitive skills; which can negatively impact employment. Fewer than 50% of people with MS remain employed 10 years following diagnosis. Many leave work prematurely or may be managed out of the workplace, resulting in high unemployment (~80%), which negatively impacts physical and psychosocial outcomes. Disease-related factors alone cannot explain this exodus from the workplace. The complex interplay between the condition, job demands, the work environment, employer attitudes and workplace policy can result in a mismatch between the work demands and the person with MS' capacity to meet them – destabilizing the job. MS' early onset, long duration, and negative impact on employment make it the costliest neurological condition.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) - a process where those disadvantaged by illness or disability can be enabled to access, maintain, or return to employment or other useful occupation - could benefit people with MS. However, few interventions for people with MS have been developed, described, or evaluated, resulting in inconclusive evidence regarding its effectiveness. It remains unclear what type of VR support or content is needed or when, where or how best to implement this.

This presentation will draw on research in our centre to i) develop a VR job retention intervention, indicating the need for individually tailored VR support for both people with MS, employers and co-workers to help them better understand MS and improve workplace relationships and ii) interviews with people with MS during the pandemic, suggesting how working experiences were improved by home based working and accommodations that supported productivity and enabled them to remain in work.

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