Return to work after stroke

Key findings

- It is feasible to recruit and randomise people from a regional stroke unit to a clinical trial.

- A questionnaire booklet used face-to-face at baseline, and postally for follow-up at 3, 6 and 12 months’ time points can capture primary outcomes (return to work and benefits status) and secondary outcomes of mood, disability and instrumental activities of daily living, work and participation in society.

- A more effective way of collecting information on stroke type and severity, and a more sensitive way of finding out annual income and benefits claimed, need to be explored for future studies.

- The content of intervention can be captured using a proforma developed for a vocational rehabilitation study in traumatic brain injury and adapted for use following stroke. This enabled detailed description of intervention provided in the trial which could be used to implement findings in clinical practice and replicate the intervention in future research studies. It has also contributed to the development of a model of early stroke specific vocational rehabilitation.

- A qualitative interview study with trial participants and their employers explored the effectiveness of the trial intervention and the way it influenced the timing and success of return to work outcomes from their personal perspective.

- A qualitative interview study with health and social care commissioners has highlighted the need to make vocational rehabilitation a targeted outcome for community stroke services and to seize emerging opportunities for joint commissioning through Health and Wellbeing Boards.

Project aims

- To explore barriers to vocational rehabilitation for stroke survivors in one English county.

- To find out what key stakeholders want from stroke specific vocational rehabilitation (SSVR).

- To design, develop and deliver SSVR in a feasibility randomised controlled trial (RCT) comparing it with usual care.

- To describe and analyse the content of the trial intervention.

- To evaluate the effectiveness of SSVR from the perspective of stroke survivors and their employers.

Background

Approximately 150,000 people have a stroke each year in the UK (Office of National Statistics 2001) and a quarter of these occur in those under 65 years of age (Daniel et al 2009).

‘Return to work’ is a quality marker in the National Stroke Strategy (Department of Health 2007) which suggests action is needed to ensure support is offered to individuals and their carers to enable return to paid or voluntary work. The National Clinical Guidelines for Stroke (Intercollegiate Stroke Working Party 2012) also state that rehabilitation services capable of meeting the vocational needs of stroke survivors should be commissioned.

There is insufficient high quality evidence to support or refute the effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation in returning stroke survivors to work and intervention is not described in enough detail to enable replication (Baldwin and Brusco 2011, Treger et al 2007).

The National Institute for Health Research (2008) report on rehabilitation for long term health conditions, including stroke, called for qualitative research on service user experiences of rehabilitation and their involvement in evaluation studies so that the extent to which their needs are being met can be captured. Employer involvement in vocational rehabilitation studies is largely absent and yet their influence considered important (Coole et al 2012, Lock et al 2005).
Methodology

The study consisted of three phases:

Phase I: Pre-trial intervention development and testing
Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the views of 18 stakeholders in one English county. This included four occupational therapists providing stroke rehabilitation in different settings including in-patients, out-patients, community and occupational health services. Views on barriers to vocational rehabilitation following stroke and what stakeholders would like from SSVR were sought and used to develop an intervention tested in a feasibility RCT.

Phase IIa Feasibility randomised controlled trial
People aged 16 and over, living in the southern part of the county who had suffered a stroke and were working (paid or voluntary) or in education at the time of their stroke, were recruited from among those admitted to the regional stroke unit (n=50). Half of the participants were randomised to stroke specific vocational rehabilitation in addition to usual care, or to usual care. A booklet comprising standardized and bespoke questionnaires was compiled for use face-to-face with participants at baseline, and by post at three, six and twelve months after recruitment. Primary outcomes were occupational (working or not, hours worked) and benefit status.

Phase IIb Implementation Research
Post-trial interview study: Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method to explore the experiences and opinions of stroke survivors and their employers receiving occupational therapy led vocational rehabilitation. One case study, 12 trial participants and 6 employers were interviewed.

Commissioner Interview Study
Nineteen commissioner interviews were carried out across three counties. Barriers and enablers to stroke specific vocational rehabilitation service development were explored using thematic analysis by an implementation theme research fellow and validity checked with members of the return to work study team.

Benefits of the research to service users and the profession
This project has directly led to a new occupational therapy vocational rehabilitation (OT VR) service being commissioned. It has also contributed to the evidence base on vocational rehabilitation delivered by occupational therapists following stroke and has developed the research capacity of the profession. Occupational therapists working together with key stakeholders are in a prime position to influence practice, policy and commissioning of vocational rehabilitation services.

Publications


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