

Welsh Backs Stakeholder Consultation Interim Report – April 2005

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1 Introduction

1.1 The problem of back pain

Back pain is a significant problem in Wales and the UK as a whole. There are 28 000 people in Wales claiming incapacity benefit (IB) because of back problems, representing 14% of all incapacity claims in Wales.

The cost of back pain in Wales illustrates the extent of the problem:

IB expenditure on back pain:	£90M
Health care costs to treat back pain:	£150M
Costs to employers in sickness absence:	£250M
TOTAL:	£490M

But, the monetary cost of back pain doesn't tell the whole story. Back pain has a deep impact on people's lives, often preventing sufferers from engaging in everyday, and work activities. It is easy to see how this compounds into a bigger problem leading to depression, and a feeling of worthlessness. It is known that back pain has a strong psycho-social element, which closely links it to mental ill-health. The prevalence of mental ill health, at least in terms of incapacity benefit claims, closely follows that of back pain, so the problem is bigger than is indicated by the monetary cost. In addition to this, employers suffer, footing the cost and inconvenience of sickness absence. This is very difficult to measure, and true costs are likely to be higher than the conservative figure quoted above.

1.2 Examples of tackling back pain

There are very good reasons for tackling back pain, and others have attempted to do so, notably in Australia and Scotland where there have been advertising campaigns to raise public awareness.

Both of these campaigns aimed to improve public knowledge of how to manage back pain using simple messages to 'stay active' and that 'hurt does not mean harm'. The Scottish 'Working Backs' campaign focused on delivering these messages using radio advertising, whilst the Australian campaign used television advertising. Both have demonstrated a positive change in public knowledge about the best way to treat back pain, and in Australia, in particular a change in public behaviour has been measured with evidence of decreased sickness absence and incapacity benefit claims.

1.3 Stakeholder consultation event

A stakeholder consultation event was held at the St. David's hotel, Cardiff on 22nd March, and represented the first step to bring together key stakeholders and capture their views to shape a campaign, and get a feel for support for a campaign. A primary focus at this early stage was to form a view of what the

campaign messages should be. For this reason, the majority of attendees at the event were healthcare professional representatives although some employer/employee representatives were also present. The event was by no means the end of the consultation process, which now continues with this report.

1.4 Stakeholder event and scope of consultation

Targeting the right stakeholders is essential to the success of the campaign. We tried to target the key stakeholders including: healthcare professionals, employer representatives and employee/general public representatives. The latter two groups are much more difficult to capture, and we are aware that others should also be consulted. Identifying others who should be involved was another purpose of the stakeholder consultation event.

<i>Feedback</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Private sector employee representation was limited at the event• Others who should be consulted (not included at the event):<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arthritis research council/arthritis care (ARMA)• Trades unions – TUC are apparently very supportive of the rehabilitation approach• More representatives of workers' views• Pharmacists (in their advisory role)

1.5 Format and purpose of this report

This report summarises the feedback from stakeholder event. This first stage of consultation gathered feedback including the following key topics and questions:

- Do we need a Welsh Backs campaign to raise awareness of good back pain management?
- What should the campaign messages be?
- How should the campaign messages be targeted?
- Who should be involved in the campaign and what should be their roles?

2 Tackling back pain in Wales – is a campaign needed?

One of the purposes of the Welsh Backs stakeholder event was to gauge whether or not there was support for a Welsh Assembly Government campaign on the issue.

It was quickly confirmed that there was strong support for a back pain campaign.

Feedback

- Generally there was positive support for a Welsh Backs campaign and frustration in some quarters that such a campaign had been proposed before and never happened
- There need to be clear aims about what can be achieved with the Welsh Backs campaign

3 The campaign messages

3.1 Treatment and expectations

We asked health professionals to summarise the most effective ways of treating back pain.

<i>Feedback</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The following were listed as the best treatments for non-specific lower back pain:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Advice (to exercise, carry on as normal and get manipulation treatment)- Use of analgesics- Give the patient enough time to understand advice and ask questions• Patients presenting with back pain should have their expectations closely managed. Their expectations will differ, depending on the individual, which would need to be clearly understood by the health professional. An open and honest discussion would enable the situation to be assessed, and properly managed with a goal setting approach• Patients should get early referral to specialist professionals giving consistent advice

3.2 Specificity and consistency

Delegates were asked about the campaign messages they thought should be promoted in the campaign.

<i>Feedback</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working Backs Scotland chose to focus on acute non-specific lower back pain. Such a description may 'medicalise' the problem and dilute the clarity of the message and make it more complicated, when what is needed is increased general awareness• Chronic pain management guidelines (from the clinical standards advisory group on chronic back care) suggest activity for all conditions, so there is no harm in simply focusing on 'back pain' without describing a more detailed category of back pain• No views were expressed that the campaign should be targeted towards a more closely defined description of back pain• Advice messages should be clear and consistent and easily available and kept simple• Different groups of health professionals should empower the patient to manage their condition

- A clear basic message needs to make the following points:
 - **Pain does not mean harm;**
 - **Back pain is very common and rarely serious;**
 - **Focus on managing and coping with pain;**
 - **Stay active and pursue a normal life as far as possible;**
 - **See a health professional if you are worried or pain continues (after 3 days of pursuing a normal life and taking pain relief)**
- The message about pain management should clearly explain what is (and isn't) possible
- Advice provided by health professionals should be 'actionable' by the patient

Further observations

- Some wanted a definition of what 'active' means. The general feeling (mainly from Gordon Waddell speaking about the Scottish and Australian campaigns) was that this means different things to different people. The key purpose of the message should be – don't avoid activities you would normally partake in
- There was some debate about when to see a health professional, and comments were noted that we should provide more advice on when to seek medical opinion
- Some concerns were expressed about advice provided by some GPs – it was suggested that GPs will need training to deliver a consistent message
- One group reported the message should include 'avoiding further injury'
- Messages may be different for different presentations e.g. acute simple or acute complex

3.3 Evidence for campaign messages

We asked health professionals what evidence was available to back up the messages they thought the campaign should promote.

Feedback

- Health professionals confirmed that there is significant evidence to support the basic message of 'staying active' when suffering from back pain, and that this is consistent with other guidance
- In particular, there is sound evidence that prescribed bed rest is harmful

- There is no scientific evidence that activity actively does harm in any back conditions but it may not do any good in a limited percentage of cases
- The 'Beam trial' has proven to be an effective treatment with manual therapy/manipulation and exercise or rehabilitation followed by exercise having the best effect
- More work is needed in collecting evidence to support the 'stay active' message
- We need better intelligence on the causes of absence
- Subdividing back pain into different categories is difficult – Department of Health in England are currently working on this
- Working Backs Scotland has been a success – their work should be repeated, but we should learn from their mistakes and target socio-economic groups they may have missed

3.4 Back pain and work

When it comes to the cause of back injuries occupational and personal activities are inextricably linked – it's the same whether you pull a muscle in your back playing rugby or lifting a heavy box at work. However, there is much that can be done to minimise the risk of back injury – and employers have an opportunity (and responsibility) to do this in the workplace.

Regardless of whether a back injury is caused by work, back pain will still occur amongst employees, and employers will still have to deal with the consequences of it.

We asked all groups involved in the stakeholder event to comment on back pain and employment, including roles and interactions of the key stakeholder groups.

Feedback

- The need to reinforce the legal duty to carry out risk assessments (reducing risks to a level as low as reasonably practicable) and that if you are an employer, you have a responsibility to do this
- A single message may not tackle beliefs held by employers that rehabilitation is expensive and not cost effective so the Welsh Backs campaign should also have a focus on employer/employee relationships and rehabilitation back into the workplace
- Back pain does not 'write off' an employee, it is a condition that needs careful management to the mutual benefit of both the employee and the employer

- 'Fit for work' should not be a black and white statement
- Employers do not need a 'challenge' but themselves need support in helping to rehabilitate employees
- Employers should provide intermediary referral for treatment of employees suffering back pain – to specialists other than their GP
- Clear case studies should be presented to employers, promoting understanding of the benefits to employers and employees of continuing to work – both by HSE promoting best practice in the workplace and the Welsh Backs campaign
- Physical activity should be encouraged in the workplace with Government incentives like Corporate Health Standard

4 Ownership of the campaign

4.1 Roles of stakeholders

If a Welsh Backs campaign is to be successful, stakeholder 'ownership' is essential. The key note speech by Ruth Hall highlighted this, explaining that Health Challenge Wales is about taking responsibility for health at all levels. This means the general public and employees taking responsibility for their own health, and employers taking responsibility for the health of their employees.

This section records the feedback from the stakeholder event of the responsibilities of the key stakeholder groups in making Welsh Backs successful.

4.2 Employers' responsibilities

Employers have a legal duty to protect the health of their employees, mainly from work activities that may affect their health. However, there is no legal duty for employers to positively promote good health to their employees and assist in rehabilitation back to work, although it is in their best interests to do so.

We asked stakeholders what they thought employers' responsibilities were and the role they should play.

Feedback

- Building links with health professionals to work in the mutual interest of enabling staff to return to work, and helping to remove the barriers that prevent return to work
- Do their bit to enable return to work including:
 - Adapting jobs and tasks
 - Phasing the return to work
 - Encouraging flexible working (such as working from home)
 - Considering part time work
 - Having effective HR policies such as training managers in effective 'attendance management'
 - Providing physiotherapy and counselling services
 - Involving employees in changes that are made
- Using occupational health services that are available (not necessarily free), for example, some GP practices employ 'industrial nurses' whose time can be purchased by companies
- Promoting the key messages of the Welsh Backs campaign in innovative ways (this is linked to the Corporate Health Standard that encourages employers to promote health in the workplace)

- Support workers returning to work, gaining understanding from other employees by making it clear that alternative duties are not a 'cop out'
- Become and encourage 'supply chain champions' to promote high standards of rehabilitation and prevention
- Back pain should not be treated in isolation for employees – they may have other linked problems such as stress that also need addressing

4.3 Government's responsibilities

Government has a role in the development and delivery of the Welsh Backs campaign. Other government bodies also have a role in contributing, including the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

We asked stakeholders about the role of government in this campaign.

Feedback

- Government (WAG) should co-ordinate the Welsh Backs campaign
- Government and the public sector should lead the way and be an exemplar to other employers in helping people back to work
- The current system encourages the 'work shy', so (HR) policy change and firm management is required to challenge this behaviour
- Building up occupational health services to provide support for employers, such as access to physiotherapy and occupational health 'triage'
- Provide information support for employers and more information and guidance to ensure compliance with health and safety legislation
- Ensure all stakeholders are on board in a co-ordinated Welsh Backs campaign including insurance companies who can help drive through improvements in rehabilitation in the workplace – HSE in particular have a role in enabling this approach
- The regulator (HSE and local authorities) should be 'visible'
- Ensure that a wider, integrated approach is taken to this issue making links as appropriate with other Government initiatives
- Provide incentives to businesses to make improvements with tools such as the Corporate Health Standard, Manual Handling Passport Scheme and Investors in People award
- Government may have a role in making links between GPs and

employers, and addressing the systems in place that are barriers to returning to work

4.4 Healthcare professionals' responsibilities

Healthcare professionals include doctors/GPs, nurses, physiotherapists, osteopaths, chiropractors and other specialists. They are key to developing the campaign messages but also have a role in delivering messages when they advise their patients.

We asked stakeholders about the role of healthcare professionals in this campaign.

Feedback

- Healthcare professionals should be willing to work in partnership with employers in their mutual interests of enabling staff to return to work
- There should be commitment to remove barriers that prevent return to work, for example non-specific 'signing off' by GPs
- Taking the time to explain the 'stay active' message to patients in a consistent manner using a range of methods (written, visual, oral) – GPs could for example provide information packs for back pain sufferers
- Outlining patients' responsibilities regarding their recovery
- 'Signposting' patients to available support services and others who can help

4.5 Working together

We asked stakeholders to comment on how different stakeholder groups work together to achieve the improvements Welsh Backs is seeking.

Feedback

- Delivering the Welsh Backs campaign should be a multi-faceted approach by a range of bodies
- There needs to be a cohesive triangle between the GP, the employer and the employee, but there are problems:
 - Sharing confidential medical information with employers is a difficult issue
 - Health providers need to protect themselves and can only provide information, not make decisions for employers
- Few links currently exist between healthcare professionals and employers, and those that do are between private healthcare providers and

employers. For example, some companies employ occupational physiotherapists

- Employers should initiate the liaison with health professionals to provide effective rehabilitation
- Promoting the idea of partnership working between employers and health professionals is more important than the medium
- Ideally there would be an all encompassing service to rehabilitate back pain sufferers, but in reality there must be a triage service with everyone working together on an individual basis

5 Running the campaign

5.1 Targeting the public

'The public' includes employers and employees, so targeting the public will also reach employers and employee groups.

We asked stakeholders how the public should be targeted in a Welsh Backs campaign.

Feedback

- The general public can be targeted using advertising – TV/radio campaigns which should be snappy and to the point
- True story case studies should be used to illustrate the messages
- The campaign should be progressive and long term with a 'snappy' slogan
- There should be one central point of contact for people requiring further information
- The 'general public' consist of different sub groups: old people for example will respond to the 'stay active' message differently to young people – Welsh Backs should be careful to capture these different groups
- Different groups include those with differing financial needs and employment statuses – self employed people are more likely to return to work more quickly
- The right person to 'champion the cause' should be found to unravel the issues in a simple way –
 - the example of Jamie Oliver and school dinners was given
 - Different champions may be needed for different groups (older/younger)
 - Champions may themselves be good case study examples
- In order to change the current back pain culture in the longer term, we should be targeting children and including this on their learning curriculum – general awareness and behaviour setting starts here

5.2 Targeting employers

Employers will require more specific messages and guidance to deliver improvements.

We asked stakeholders to comment on how employers should be targeted.

Feedback

- Employers can be targeted generally in the same way as members of the public – via advertising campaigns with case study examples
- Employers need convincing that addressing sickness absence is cost efficient, and good back pain management can save them money
- Employers should be encouraged to realise the benefits of a positive workplace culture with full staff involvement, not imposing a culture on them
- Employers should be encouraged to promote the ‘stay active’ message using a range of methods such as:
 - Sending information in wage packets
 - Having information stands in canteens/rest rooms
 - Holding specific information days
 - Providing information on intranet sites
 - Ensuring that those on sick leave are included
- Employers should be given incentives for training and educating their staff in back pain issues (including manual handling)
- Legal requirements for employers to carry out risk assessments for activities that can cause back injuries should be promoted
- Regulators (HSE and local authorities) have a role to play in promoting the messages and carrying out enforcement where necessary
- Additionally, trades unions, the federation of small business, chambers of commerce and other relevant bodies can be used to target both employees and employers
- Insurance companies who can offer incentives to employers who manage back pain and return to work well should be used to target employers with the ‘stay active’ message

5.3 Targeting employees

Employees again fall under the overall target of ‘the public’, but there are reasons why employees should be more specifically targeted – such as promoting trust and closer working with their employers where employers are working to rehabilitate workers suffering from back pain.

Feedback

- Employees should be targeted in the same way as the general public using advertising campaigns and the same messages
- Trade unions should be encouraged to target employees with the ‘stay

active' message

6 Health service support

Suggestions were made that would require changes in the way health services are delivered. These are noted here.

Feedback

- Health services should be combined to have a 'fast and aggressive' approach to treating back pain giving the best chance of recovery, reducing chronicity and re-occurrence. The current system apparently does not allow this to happen
- A national occupational health service (such as Workplace Health Direct) is probably the only way of delivering support to SMEs on good management of back pain and return to work
- Back pain and the Welsh Backs messages should be included in health professional training programmes, particularly for GPs as concerns were expressed about the advice some give out
- There should be an occupational health triage system that can be accessed by all employers

7 Summary and feedback

This report represents the views of those attending the stakeholder consultation day on 22nd March. Employers and employee representatives were not well represented, and more work is required to capture their views.

This report will be circulated to those that were present at the event and used as a basis for discussions with other stakeholders.

Please comment on any aspects of the campaign covered by this report (or not covered, that you think should be).

Please send your comments to:

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This report will be updated in the summer to include further feedback and proposals of how the campaign will be taken forward.