Reviewer's report

Title: Return to work of breast cancer survivors: a systematic review of intervention studies

Version: 1 Date: 30 September 2008

Reviewer: Marja-Liisa Lindbohm

Reviewer's report:

General
The topic of the paper is relevant because of the growing number of cancer survivors in all Western societies. Information on actions influencing return to work after cancer is needed. Unfortunately, the number of studies detected was only four, and only one of them included a control group. Thus, it is not easy to make conclusions, other than putting more effort to interventions. However, I would have been happy to see more detailed suggestions on the development of interventions.

Major compulsory revisions

Background
1. The authors give as the objective of their paper "to identify intervention studies of breast cancer survivors in which the outcome was return to work". I think that the aim should also have been to learn something about these studies, i.e. effectiveness of interventions (whether counselling and exercise increases return to work).

Results
2. The table describing the four studies could be made more concise, systematic and congruent. Here are some suggestions how to do this:

I suggest that the column "Design" would include only the design, not the number of participants. Now, this number is given in two (studies 26 and 27) or three (study 28) different columns, but it could be given only once in column "Participants". After this correction, the column "Follow-up and outcomes" would include only these topics and it could be entitled "Length of follow-up and outcomes".

3. All studies: Statement "Work status pre cancer: N=88 (or some other number)" is unclear. I suggest adding 88 employed women.

4. All studies: I suggest that the expression Sample and the following text will be excluded from the column "Description, interventions" and this description will be given in the text.

5. Study 28 by Winick et al, column "Description interventions" indicates twice
that this is a post mastectomy rehabilitation group programme. A similar detailed
description of counselling content and frequency in this study is given both in the
table and the text. A shortened version could be given in one place and a more
detailed in another.

6. Study 25 by Maguire et al: I suggest that the term Exp will be changed as
counselling group.

7. Study 26 by Fismen et al column "Follow up and outcomes" includes a
statement "Baseline: before rehab programme". This kind of statement is not
included in the description of other studies and it is also unclear what it means.
Column "Description, interventions": description of counselling content is missing.

8. In general, the description of the studies in results could be more analytical
and comparative. Which aspects (e.g., aim, intervention, length of follow-up)
were common to these studies and which were not?

9. Instead of giving the numbers of those returning to work (36 out of 46 women)
the author should give the percentage like in the description of other studies (text
and table 1). On the other hand I suggest that the sentence "Of women who had
only a breast removed, a simple mastectomy, 100% (n=2) returned to work..." I
suggest saying "Two women had only a breast removed, a simple mastectomy,
and both returned to work".

Discussion

10. First paragraph, lines 6-7: The authors' conclusion on return to work "at best
there may be an indication for a positive trend" seems to be based on only one
study which included a reference group and indicated that return to work was
more common in the counselling group than in the control group. Other studies
reported the frequency of those who return to work, but it is not clear whether the
frequency had been lower without counselling and exercise. This should be
indicated clearly in discussion and in abstract.

11. First paragraph, lines 9-10: The authors write that "detailed specifics on the
content of counselling sessions were not described" in the four studies. I'm not
sure what this exactly means because at least three studies seem to have
included a description on the counselling content, as reported in the table and the
text.

12. The last paragraph: The authors say that the most important finding of their
review is the lack of methodologically sound research into interventions of breast
cancer survivors with the outcome return to work. I think they could go a little
further and indicate here in more detail which type of interventions they think
should. This could be made based on these four studies, and on ideas obtained
from the intervention studies aiming to improve quality of life (references 11-19 in
their paper) and from other studies on return to work among cancer survivors.

Discretionary revisions
Background
13. In the third paragraph, the authors describe the topics of earlier studies aiming to improve the quality of life of the breast cancer survivors. In addition to describing the topics, I suggest describing shortly the results of these papers. In other words, which interventions were found effective and what were their effects?

Methods
14. I wonder whether the authors are familiar with the paper by Verbeek et al (OEM 2005;62: 682-7) on a search strategy for occupational health intervention studies and whether they have followed this strategy. If not, is it possible that they might have found a few more studies using this strategy?

Results
15. The statement "The women in these studies had less emotional stress and recovered more adequately" should indicate the comparison group.

Discussion
16. First paragraph, lines 12-13: A reference should be given for the statement starting "The individual treatment characteristics have shown...".

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.