Author's response to reviews

Title: How do couples influence each other's physical activity behaviours in retirement: an exploratory qualitative study

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How do couples influence each other’s physical activity behaviours in retirement: an exploratory qualitative study

Physical activity levels in most older adults are insufficient for health. A recent body of evidence, including a study by Södergren (2012) published in BMC Public Health, suggests that even small increases in physical activity can have a positive impact on the health and well-being in old age.

In our earlier systematic review of quantitative studies (Barnett et al. 2012, AJPM 43: 329-36), we found that physical activity patterns change significantly in retirement and that the transition to retirement could be a critical period for the targeting of interventions. To better understand the underlying reasons for these changes, we recently conducted a systematic review of qualitative evidence on the experience of physical activity in retirement (Barnett et al. 2012, IJBMPA 97: 1-10). A major shortcoming of existing qualitative and quantitative evidence is that all studies adopted an individualistic approach to physical activity in retirement; and no study considered the influence a spouse might have. Given that most people retire as part of a couple, a better understanding of how intimate partners influence and shape each other’s physical activity behaviour could provide important information for future interventions.

In this paper we offer the first qualitative exploration of spousal influences on each other’s physical activity behaviour in retirement, using semi-structured interviews with a varied sample of elderly couples recruited from the EPIC-Norfolk study cohort in the UK. We found that all couples were concordant in their belief that it was important to maintain an active lifestyle in retirement; however, most spouses diverged in their attitudes towards physical activity which was reflected in different actual exercise behaviours. Spouses were nonetheless an important source of social
support, and spousal support was perceived as important for initiation and maintenance of regular physical activity in retirement. Interventions should aim to create supportive spousal environments for physical activity in which spouses encourage each other to pursue their preferred forms of physical activity.

We submit this paper for consideration by BMC Public Health. This paper has been submitted solely to BMC Public Health; it has not previously been published, either in whole or in part, nor have the findings been posted online. The corresponding author confirms full access to all aspects of the research and writing process, and takes final responsibility for the paper. This study adheres to the RATS guidelines on qualitative research.

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Yours sincerely

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