Reviewer’s report

Title: Solution-focused follow-up for sick listed employees with psychological problems or muscle skeletal pain: a randomised controlled trial

Version: 1 Date: 20 December 2004

Reviewer: jos H verbeek

Reviewer’s report:

General
Summary:
The authors revised an earlier manuscript in which they reported a feasibility study on the effectiveness of a solution-focused intervention in workers on long term sick leave. Apparently it was not published and now it is submitted again with a larger number of participants (N=103). Workers were randomised to either a solution-focused course (N=53) or to regular care (N=50). There was no significant difference in return to work or the SF-36.

Comments in general:
Same comments as in my previous review. I am happy that a study like this is performed and adequately reported. There are too few of them in the literature. The study is adequately designed and reported. The major problem seems to be that the potential participants are not interested to take the course. Like I said in my previous review, the feasibility of the intervention seems to be very low. I do understand that the authors are enthusiastic about the solution-focussed method, but it simply does not seem to be attractive to the participants if only 1 in 7 are willing to participate. I still wonder why the authors do not consider other models of intervention for long-term sick leave. There is considerable evidence that self-perceived disability is an important factor and that it is amenable to change. I feel that their enthusiasm for their intervention is not warranted by the results of their study. For example, concluding that the intervention is effective in the last paragraph is not justified by the data. I do not agree with their opinion about the difficulty of offering a RCT to workers on sick leave. Offering randomisation to patients with cancer is much more difficult and encounters the same kind of problems.

Detailed comments:
- Question is new and well designed
- Methods are appropriate
- Data seem sound, however I miss data on working conditions and occupation of the participants. These are important predictors of return to work and potential sources of bias.
- Discussion is not balanced in my view. Since the uptake is so low, the intervention is not feasible in the current form. I would like to see a comparison with different types of person-directed interventions in different settings such as hospital based or rehabilitation based. Now, the discussion focuses almost exclusively on inherent weaknesses of the study. However, I feel that there should be more room for the conclusion that the intervention simply does not work.
- Title would improve from replacing follow-up by intervention.
- Abstract: The one but last sentence should read. “A voluntary solution-focussed intervention offered by social-security offices is not effective. However, it might have an effect in the subgroup of participants with psychological problems only.”
- Writing: still some spelling mistakes left: page 4 para 2 heath>health, page 12 Treated on > treat of.
Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Change conclusion in abstract

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Add data on working conditions and occupation of participants

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Change title

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests