Reviewer's report

Title: No job return for back pain disability pensioners: 3-year follow-up after a randomized controlled trial

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Reviewer: Patrick Loisel

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No job return for back pain disability pensioners: 3-year follow-up after a randomized trial.

L H Magnussen & al.

Summary:
This is follow-up study of disability pensioners, having received long-term disability pension (around 10 years). The study population is distributed in four groups from these disability pensioners: two groups of pensioners having back pain (experimental and control) are issued from a previous RCT, a group is made of disability pensioners having back pain and having refused to participate to the RCT and the fourth group is made of disability pensioners having MSK other than back pain. The results show that, whatever the intervention delivered, the RTW is close to nil after 1 and 3 years.

Evaluation:
1- This study brings interesting data on RTW on a very chronic population of long-term disability pensioners. However, the presentation of the paper makes it difficult to read and perhaps misleading. The main problem comes from the description of the study population, which is ambiguous and inadequate. I acknowledge that the author having previously performed a RCT with negative result was biased when adding other groups for building the population of the PRESENT study and in this way the Fig 1 should be modified. In the present study, initiated as I understand when the RCT was finished, the four groups of disability pensioners (DP) are all directly issued from the top box of 899 DP: DP with back pain having been submitted to the so-called vocational intervention, DP with back pain having not been submitted to this intervention (by chance), DP with back pain not submitted due to refusal of intervention and finally DP having MSK disorders other than back pain and not submitted to the intervention. Also, I do not understand why the authors included the 19 subjects living in other countries who could not have refused an intervention that was not proposed (they should be a fifth “exotic” group directly issued from all pensioners).

2- The title is misleading, as it is not only a 3 year FU of a RCT. I should more resemble to: long term FU of disability pensioners having MSK disorders

3- The time upon disability pension at study entry is presented as a result, but it should be presented earlier as a description of the study population, indicating
quickly to the reader that it was a study on a very chronic population. Also, these subjects were probably off work for some time before being admitted to the disability pension, depending on regulations in Norway that should be briefly described to show the true chronicity of this population. Also, the statistical difference found among groups related to the duration of the pension has in fact no “clinical” or “social” difference between 9.8 and 11 years. This should be mentioned in the discussion.

4- Intervention: the authors name it as a “vocational oriented rehabilitation program”. In fact its brief description resembles more to kind of CBT program (or education with “pep talk” mainly delivered by Social Security personnel. The “vocational” part looks to be only some vocational counseling. This does not resemble to workplace interventions as it is finally acknowledged in the discussion.

Opinion:
There are few studies giving a somewhat precise description of the evolution of very chronic patients who have reorganized their lives in a way approved for a long period by the society. Discussion and conclusion are adequate. A qualitative study on the disability perceptions of this population might be more explicative and recommended by the authors in their conclusion. I finally think that this paper deserves publication with the abovementioned suggestions.

**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.