

Back Pain

R Buchbinder et al. *BMJ* June (2001) #7301 p 1517.

A study of the effectiveness of a media campaign to change popular and GP beliefs about low back pain (LBP).

The study and intervention took place in Victoria, Australia, with a total population of 4.3 million.

Controls for the study were taken from an adjacent state – New South Wales (NSW), population 6 million.

4730 members of the Victoria population were asked about their beliefs about LBP before, 2 and 2.5 years after the programme started. A similar survey of 2556 GPs was undertaken before and 2 years after the programme. Interviews were performed over the telephone.

Data was obtained using Back Beliefs Qr. (BBQ) and supporting information was found from Workers' Compensation claims data and medical costs data.

The media campaign was based on the principles espoused by the "*Back Book*", including advice to - stay active and -remain at work. Media methods included TV commercials, radio discussions and printed ads, billboards, posters, workplace visits and of course distribution of the *Back Book*.

Response rates of 55%, 44% and 44% were achieved at time zero, 2 years and 2.5 years respectively.

Awareness of the campaign increased to 86% by the end of the campaign.

A statistically significant change in BBQ scores from 26.5 (95% CI = 26.1 to 26.8) before, to 29.7(95% CI = 29.2 to 30.3) after 2.5 years. A difference of 3.2 (95% CI = 2.6 to 3.9)

There was no change in NSW 26.3 (95% CI = 25.9 to 26.6) although a small proportion of citizens reported awareness of the campaign in their neighbouring state.

The survey of GPs found that the campaign had changed their views. In one important respect GPs were 3.6 (95% CI = 2.4 to 5.6) times as likely to believe that being pain free was not a pre-requisite for Return to work. GPs are the gatekeepers for LBP-related sickness absence.

Compensation claims for back pain fell in number by 15%.

Comment

The significant result is probably the change in GP beliefs about back pain and the return to work. It is possible that GPs would be more likely to adhere to the new beliefs, especially if they saw their customers being effectively lobbied in this way.

The 10% change in popular beliefs may be of lasting significance, but it is not clear that respondents were not simply saying what they thought the questioners wanted to hear.

A similar campaign on the subject of Whiplash Associated Disorder might be of interest.