



Community mobility

An exploration of the community mobility difficulties experienced by people with arthritis and related musculoskeletal conditions

A RESEARCH PROJECT PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

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Institution: Department of Occupational Therapy, La Trobe University

Grant: \$5,000

Background

In September 2011 the Board of Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria (*now Musculoskeletal Australia*) approved the funding of the research project, *An exploration of the community mobility difficulties experienced by people with arthritis and related musculoskeletal conditions*, as part of our 2011 Grants Program.

The aim of the project was to gather information from consumers and evaluate the difficulties experienced by people with musculoskeletal conditions when driving and using public transport.

At the time this project was undertaken, there was no Australian research and very little international research on this topic. Information gathered through this pilot Australian study will start to resolve this lack of data, and will inform future research and funding applications.

Arthritis, musculoskeletal conditions and mobility

Musculoskeletal conditions are a common cause of chronic pain and disability. They affect 6.1 million (26.9%) of the Australian population. The majority of these people (58.4%) are aged between 25-64 years of age.ⁱ

Being able to maintain independence and mobility is important. We need to be able to drive or catch public transport to access healthcare services, get to and from work, visit friends and family and to be involved in support groups, exercise classes and other recreational activities. However, pain and disability associated with musculoskeletal conditions may affect a person's ability to do these things and maintain social engagement.

The project

Researchers from the Department of Occupational Therapy at La Trobe University conducted focus groups in rural and metropolitan regions of Victoria. They ran for approximately two hours and involved 21 people.

Focus groups allow researchers to ask questions and generate discussion in an informal group setting. People in the group talk freely to the researchers and other group members, and provide valuable information about their experiences and beliefs. Focus groups provide more in-depth information than data collected from questionnaires, so a more detailed understanding about an issue can be achieved.

In addition to focus groups, the researchers collected information through a national online survey. The online survey provided important information from an additional 46 people.

Findings

Musculoskeletal conditions are often described as an 'invisible illness' because for many people there are few obvious signs of the pain and disability they are experiencing. Participants reported that due to this 'invisible illness' they did not get the assistance and consideration they needed from drivers of public transport, or access to seats and rails from members of the public.

For people in rural areas there are fewer public transport options than there are in metropolitan areas.

Taxis were a good option but not often used because of the cost. Many people were ineligible for discounts on their taxi fares, even though they had a musculoskeletal condition causing chronic pain and disability.

People using mobility devices, such as walkers, found getting on and off public transport difficult, and those using mobility scooters could not get on trams and buses at all.

Issues associated with driving included difficulties getting in and out of a car, problems filling a car with petrol, difficulty driving for long distances and the lack of parking close to where they were going

It was also reported that problems with transport in general – both driving and public transport - had impacted on the ability to continue working, with some people reducing their employment or leaving the workforce.

It's clear from information collected from both the focus groups and the online survey that people with musculoskeletal conditions experience difficulties both driving and using public transport. These difficulties have an impact on daily life as they have the potential to reduce social contacts and outings, cause isolation, affect employment and contribute to feelings of depression.

Future research

Researchers plan to build on the findings of this project and apply for grants to continue studying this area, in partnership with Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria. One area of future research is to test an intervention package – involving education, equipment and strategies - that will improve access and comfort for people with musculoskeletal conditions when driving or using public transport.

Another is a research partnership with Public Transport Victoria (and its transport operators) and community groups Yooralla and COTA-Vic to examine the issues experienced by people using mobility aids (such as wheelchairs and scooters) on public transport. This research aims to develop a world first catalogue of mobility aids, and public transport compatibility profiles, provide evidence-based recommendations to regulators, policy makers and public transport designers and providers to improve transport access, and develop validated tools to aid novice clinicians and consumers select the best mobility aids to optimise accessible public transport journeys for everyone.

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

ⁱ Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria (2013). *A problem worth solving*. Elsternwick: Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria.