

Rheumatoid arthritis sends many into early retirement

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A joint study on “The Burden of Rheumatoid Arthritis and Patient Access to Treatments” by authors from the Stockholm School of Economics (Sweden), the University of Lund (Sweden) and the Medical University of Vienna (Austria) has shown that the highest cost in rheumatoid arthritis results from patients having to leave the workforce early due to the disease. The study has just been published online in a supplement to Springer’s The European Journal of Health Economics.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is one of the most common autoimmune diseases and a leading cause of chronic pain affecting over three million people in Europe alone.

Lead author Professor Bengt Jönsson from the Stockholm School of Economics explained: “The study highlights the significant variation in patient access to disease-modifying biologic drugs for the treatment of RA. This is important because medical data have shown that early treatment with these drugs reduces inflammation and can prevent or reduce the speed of joint damage and hence the progression of affected individuals to disability.”

The total annual economic impact of rheumatoid arthritis is estimated at €42 billion in Western Europe and €3.4 billion in Eastern Europe (2006 figures). Improved treatment strategies as well as the application of ‘biologic’ rheumatoid arthritis drugs have been shown in randomized clinical trials to increase the chances for remission, halting of the progression of joint damage and improvement or prevention of disability. The study also concluded that patient access to the new drugs in Europe is very low in a number of member states and varies significantly between the EU and the US. The uptake of the drugs in the US was shown to be about three times higher than that of Western Europe.

“The costs of the drugs must be viewed within the overall cost of the disease and the benefit of these

drugs over the long term, that is in relation to their positive health impact and the savings that should eventually result from this”, health economist Dr. Gisela Kobelt said.

Up to two-thirds (65 percent) of costs for rheumatoid arthritis patients are outside the health care sector – such as productivity losses, patient out-of-pocket costs and informal care. Early retirement due to the disease is frequent, with up to 50 percent of those living with rheumatoid arthritis forced to leave the workforce and apply for a disability pension within ten years of disease onset.

“Of all the chronic diseases, rheumatoid arthritis has one of the biggest impacts on the quality of life of patients,” said Professor Josef Smolen, a rheumatologist at the Medical University of Vienna. “I am confident that this study will contribute to the discussion on the importance of RA from a societal perspective and not just a health care perspective. Patient access to good care and treatment including thorough follow-up examinations and access to innovative drug therapies, where indicated, are critical elements that will benefit all of society...”

Source: Springer

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