**Bursary Report for the British Association of Hand Therapists**

**Katie O’Donnell**

Hand Therapy Dissertation with University of Derby –

“Patient experiences of musculoskeletal disorders and work: Qualitative interviews with patients attending outpatient hand therapy and physiotherapy services”

15/01/2024 to 06/01/2025

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction:**  I’m an accredited hand therapist and occupational therapist with over 14 years of clinical experience, the last 8 years having specifically worked within hand therapy. I am the clinical lead for the children’s hand therapy service at University Hospital Southampton, run an adult rheumatology clinic as well as a general adult hand therapy clinic.  I applied for funding to support with some of the cost of the dissertation of my Hand Therapy MSc with the University of Derby. I carried out a secondary data analysis of two data sets of qualitive interviews exploring patients experiences of returning to or staying in work with an MSK condition. |
| **Topic:**  *What have you learned on the course and how will you be able to put the information you have gained into practice?"*  My dissertation provided an opportunity to conduct a qualitative reflective thematic analysis on 23 interviews conducted across two London hospitals. The data was collected by two groups of MSc students as part of their studies, under the guidance of Dr. Lisa Newington.  As part of the critical appraisal element of the project, I gained insights into the frequency of musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions and their impact on the working population. Research indicates that 1 in 10 working adults in the UK have an MSK condition (Versus Arthritis, 2024). MSK conditions are the second most common reason for workplace absenteeism, resulting in an annual cost of £3 billion (Gov.uk, 2021). The Allied Health Professionals Health and Work Report, endorsed by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists, provides specific recommendations for work-related MSK management. Additionally, changes in legislation in 2022 allowed Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, nurses, and pharmacists to issue fit notes, although the uptake of these documents remains unclear.  The dissertation also gave me the chance to learn how to conduct an in-depth reflective thematic analysis, including the use of NVivo, a data management software. I gained a better understanding of high-quality qualitative research, common sources of bias, and research errors. This has strengthened my ability to critically appraise research and apply it to my clinical practice, as well as support others in their learning and professional development.  Throughout the reflective process, I presented the study findings to a wide range of clinical groups, including rheumatologists, occupational therapists, hand therapists, and the original research collection group. This experience helped me learn how to present information in an accessible and engaging way, a skill that I will apply in future teaching settings. It also allowed me to receive valuable feedback and adapt my findings when appropriate, which is a key skill in clinical practice—being open to changing one’s mind when presented with new evidence or opinions.  The findings of the study provided me with a better understanding of patients' experiences of returning to work, the help they receive from healthcare professionals, and the support they wish they had received. I am currently in the process of writing the findings for publication. This work has made me more proactive in initiating conversations with patients about their work and providing advice on managing and returning to work. I now regularly offer patients written information, such as the Allied Health and Work Report, to guide them through the process.  Furthermore, I am more aware of the gap in information provided in fit notes and the over-reliance on GPs to issue them. I have presented my findings to my department and plan to support the team in completing fit note training. Additionally, I am advocating for senior clinicians to consider providing fit notes, as they are more likely to offer detailed information that can assist patients in their return-to-work process.  I would like to thank BAHT for the support with this project. In addition to writing up for publication, I will be presenting the results of the dissertation  IFSSH/IFSHT 2025 in Washington DC, this March. |