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Studies highlight positive findings for people living and working with MS

Researchers at the University of Tasmania's Menzies Institute for Medical Research have published two research papers with far-reaching impacts for the working lives of people with multiple sclerosis (MS).

Workplace productivity for employees with MS has been estimated, and important links between the drugs used to treat MS and employment have been discovered.

Menzies has been at the forefront of MS research and advancements for 20 years and runs Australia's largest study into MS, the Australian MS Longitudinal Study (AMSLS).

Since 2002 this body of work has used data provided by more than 3,000 people living with MS to provide practical insights into their lives. AMSLS is funded by MS Research Australia, which also supported the new studies.

Associate Professor Ingrid van der Mei, PhD student Jing Chen and their colleagues have again analysed the AMSLS data for the new research.

They found that the severity of different symptoms is most important in predicting work productivity loss, indicating that improved symptom management is crucial to working more productively and staying longer in the labour force.

Associate Professor Ingrid van der Mei said previous cost-of-illness studies had generally only included how much people were absent from work due to their MS.

"What we found was that working while dealing with the symptoms of MS led to three times more productivity loss than absenteeism, both in terms of time and cost."

The second piece of research looked at the effects of MS disease-modifying therapies on the work life of people living with MS. Disease-modifying therapies are drugs used to reduce the risk of relapses or disease progression in MS.

"Our research found that people using the most effective drugs were two to three times more likely to report improvements in the amount of work they were able to do, in work attendance and work productivity," Ms Chen said.

"This can be used to support the case that these drugs have an important, practical and positive impact on work life for people with MS. These findings are very exciting as it is the first time employment outcomes have been examined in relation to these drugs."

The outcomes of these studies are important to the community as a whole because the costs associated with early retirement and work productivity losses account for as much as 48 per cent of the total cost of MS to Australia.

The Australian MS Longitudinal Study has been used in the past to improve the lives of people living with MS. MS Australia successfully lobbied for rebates on electricity for people with MS after the finding that air conditioning use was 10 times higher in people with MS compared to the average Australian.

"We are hopeful that once again our findings will be used to make the lives of people with MS much easier to navigate, with more support available for their employment," Associate Professor van der Mei said.

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