

A bone and joint breakthrough?

Professor Kristina Åkesson, of The Bone and Joint Decade, tells *Public Service Review's* Amy Caddick about attempts to raise awareness of musculoskeletal diseases...

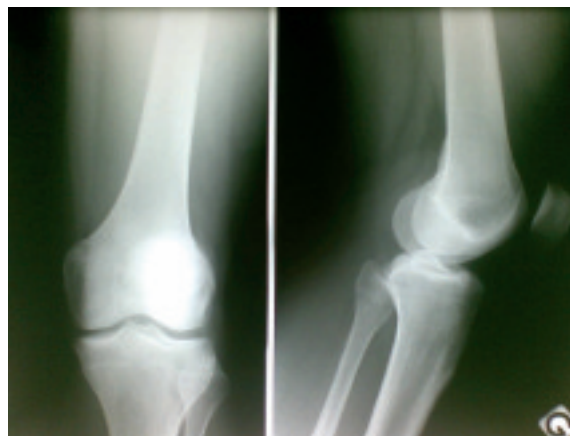
In May 2010, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work published 'OSH in Figures: Work-related Musculoskeletal Disorders in the EU – Facts and Figures'. The report stated that 'musculoskeletal diseases are the most prevalent occupational diseases at European level'. It is therefore surprising that musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) are not commonly accepted as occupational diseases in the national compensation or reporting system across Europe – especially given that 24.7% of European workers' health is affected by backache and 22.8% of workers complain of shoulder, neck or limb pain.

The reason for this lack of recognition is that MSD is caused by a number of factors relating to genetics, environment and behaviour, making it difficult to pinpoint the causes and origins of the disease. Consequently, there is some confusion over what constitutes MSD across the EU, and there are no standardised assessment criteria for such disorders across member states. It is this lack of understanding that prompted a 10 year campaign to boost awareness.

The Bone and Joint Decade (BJD), an international operation set up in January 2000, aimed to create a multidisciplinary campaign to implement and promote initiatives whilst highlighting the economic burden of musculoskeletal disorders. Some of the goals laid down at the start of the campaign include preventing the expected increase in osteoporotic fractures and joint destruction and preventing the expected increase of healthcare costs. As BJD moves towards the finish line, however, it is important to look at how successful this campaign has been.

"I thought The Bone and Joint Decade was extremely important," says Professor Kristina Åkesson, a member of the International Steering Committee at the BJD. "We can't fully measure the success of it until a few years after the decade is over, but nevertheless it's helped to raise the awareness of musculoskeletal conditions."

The BJD not only generated attention for musculoskeletal disorders, but also addressed the way in which health professionals approach patients and their care. Patient-centred care is an important factor in MSD, and one that was a strong focus of the decade. Often these disorders can leave a patient physically disabled, and so care has to



be tailored to individual needs. Many of the initiatives that have resulted from the BJD focus upon allowing patients to take control of their own conditions.

"One of the initiatives is the Fragility Fracture Network, which aims to improve all steps of fracture care," explains Åkesson, "but there are many initiatives that came out of The Bone and Joint Decade, all aiming for patients to have a better functional outcome.

"During the decade, there has been a clear change in how successful management of musculoskeletal conditions is measured; previously it relied mainly on evaluation of X-rays. Today it has become common practice to also measure how the patient perceives the outcomes after a procedure," says Åkesson. "We really benefit from knowing how the patient is feeling, and we have instruments and questionnaires which are critical in this context. Some of them are specific, for example, if you have had hip problems or a spine problem, whilst others are more generic so you can compare with other procedures such as heart surgery against hip surgery. This gives another view of how effective the individual's treatment is and also how effective treatment of musculoskeletal diseases is compared to other conditions."

Åkesson recognises the importance of continued research into MSD, not only to learn more about them, but also to improve how health professionals treat them.

"It's very important that doctors, including orthopaedic surgeons, continue to be involved in research. It is only through research that we can continue to improve our methods," she says. "We need to apply standard research



The Bone and Joint Decade has been important both in generating attention for MSD and changing medical approaches to its treatment

methods to evaluate all the new technologies that are coming in, but we also need to evaluate background information and biological changes in orthopaedics. As of yet, I think we have only seen the early phases.”

There is also a necessity for researchers and doctors to work together in order to drive forward advancements and to also stimulate innovation in the field of musculoskeletal disorders.

“Collaboration is very important because it is only once you see the patient that you truly evaluate the final outcome from advances in research. That’s why you need to have doctors who are well trained in research but who also have a good biological background. Education becomes a big part of this, and it’s essential that all doctors have a good knowledge and understanding of musculoskeletal conditions. We have seen that there is a lack of this in the curriculum of medical schools in many countries, despite the fact that they are such common diseases. I think it’s essential that every doctor has a basic understanding and is able to adequately assess the patient. That will make a huge difference to patient management.”

Training and education certainly play a role in treating these disorders, and making health professionals and researchers more aware of the physiology of MSD is vital. However, it is also important to utilise all aspects of research, rather than merely the biological elements.

Epidemiology is one area that helps in researching muscular disorders. It assists in discovering patterns of the disease and the types of people it affects, enabling experts to find practical preventions and more effective treatments.

Although epidemiology is something that is already being used in most areas, Åkesson adds that there is still much more to be done to advance awareness and create new treatment processes for MSD. However, it will be necessary to think outside the box to achieve it.

“In the future, I would particularly like to see additional advances when it comes to osteoporosis and fracture management,” says Åkesson. “I would like to see development of orthopaedic implants specifically designed for fragile bones, rather than the screws and the plates that are currently used to treat fractures surgically, and I would also like to see biological bone augmentation capable of improving fracture healing and bone strength. And of course, the future will also hold inventions that we are not able to imagine.”

Research must continue to ensure an improved outlook for MSD sufferers, and with over six million hip fractures predicted by the year 2050 there is certainly a need to raise the profile and improve education of these disorders.

¹ <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/TERO09009ENC>



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