ABSTRACT – Van Nieuwenhuyse et al 2012

Purpose: Evidence on risk factors for sick leave from prospective studies in work settings is limited. Furthermore, most available studies focused on workers with substantial low back disorders. These studies consistently report that physical work factors constitute a hindrance to work. However, it remains unclear whether the same risk factors are relevant in workers with less severe conditions or in early phases of the development of back pain. Therefore, this article aims to study risk factors for the occurrence of sick leave due to low back pain (LBP) among young workers with no or a modest history of back pain.

Methods: Participants were 716 young healthcare or distribution workers with no or minimal antecedents of LBP in the year before inclusion. We investigated the role of potential physical, psychosocial and individual risk factors at baseline on the occurrence of sick leave due to LBP one year later. To this purpose, we used Cox regression with a constant risk period.

Results: Six percent (95%CI: 4.1-7.6) of the workers reported sick leave one year later; they accounted for 12% of the sick leave days independent of cause. A non-stimulating psychosocial work environment turned out to be the strongest risk factor for sick leave due to LBP (RR 6.08; 95%CI: 1.42 - 26.07). Physical factors were not predictive.

Conclusions: In the early phases of back pain and in less severe conditions, the main benefit of interventions lies in targeting the organisation and design of jobs to create a challenging professional environment.