Measuring how patient-surgeon relationships impact return to work

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Background: Hand injuries and musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) represent a major economic burden for both patients and the society, mostly because of limitations to return to work (RTW). We hypothesized that a positive patient-surgeon relationship may ease patients’ recovery and lead to faster RTW.

Methods: This longitudinal prospective observational study comprised 219 patients aged 18–55 years on sick leave because of trauma or MSD of the upper limb from 8 French hand trauma centres. Information about patients’ health condition was collected at enrolment using 4 validated questionnaires: QuickDASH, HADS, BICF-CS for Hand Conditions, and the Quality of the Patient-Surgeon Relationship (Q-PASREL). After 6 months, patients’ progress and RTW status were assessed. Summary statistics were computed and their correlations with RTW were assessed. Logistic and Cox regression models were developed to identify predictors of RTW and time off work (TOW).

Results: Overall, 74% of RTW patients had a high or medium-high Q-PASREL score, whereas 64% of patients on sick leave had a low or medium-low Q-PASREL score. Patients with a low or medium-low Q-PASREL score were 95% and 71% less likely to RTW, compared to those with a high score. All items and scores of the Q-PASREL instrument were significantly correlated with RTW. High Q-PASREL score and severe injury were negative predictors of RTW and TOW.

Conclusions: The quality of the patient-surgeon relationship is strongly correlated with RTW and TOW. Surgeons’ efforts to improve patient engagement can minimize sick leave duration and accelerate patient recovery.