

Update 27

Is Acute LBP Benign?

The following letter to editor has just been posted (on-line) with the BMJ (www.BMJ.COM).

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Acute low back pain prognosis

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Send
response to
journal:
[Re: Acute low
back pain
prognosis](#)

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To the Editor,

The view that acute low back pain has a favourable prognosis seems to be widely accepted. For example the 2000 UK guideline states that, **"90% of cases will recover within six weeks."**(1)

Furthermore, Car and Sheikh, the authors of a recent hypothetical case report, titled, '10-minute consultation - Acute low back pain', also promote the view that acute low back pain has a favourable prognosis. (2) The authors suggest that, in advising a patient with such a condition, one should, **"...emphasise the usually benign course of simple low back pain."**

However, based on the findings of a recent systematic review (3), by Pengel et al., estimates and suggestions, like those quoted above, may no longer reflect the findings of most prospective studies dealing with the prognosis of acute low back pain.

In short, the course of simple low back pain is often anything but benign. For example, Pengel et al. found that the cumulative risk of at least one recurrence within 12 months was from 66% to 84% (pooled estimate 73%, 59% to 88%).

Based on their systematic review of the relevant literature, Pengel et al. conclude that, "**Low levels of pain and disability persist from three to at least 12 months**", and, "**Most people will have at least one recurrence within 12 months.**"

Advising patients with an initial bout of acute low back pain that their condition is benign and self-limiting, as Car and Sheikh suggest we should, risks belittling the seriousness of the problem and may result in patients disregarding other important advice made by the authors.

1.) Koes BW, Van Tulder MW, Ostelo R, Burton KA, Waddell G. Clinical guidelines for the management of low back pain in primary care: an international comparison. Spine 2001; 26:2504-13.

2.) Car J, Sheikh A. Acute low back pain [10-minute consultation]. BMJ 2003; 327:541.

3.) Pengel LHM, Herbert R, Maher CG, Refshauge KM. Acute low back pain: systematic review of its prognosis. BMJ 2003; 327:323.

Competing interests: None declared

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