



The South African Academy of Family Practice's Rural Health Initiative (RHI) is proud to be able to bring you the following section of the journal, that will concentrate on issues pertaining to rural health in South Africa. We hope to provoke discussion on these issues and would encourage anyone interested in rural health to offer contributions to future issues.



Helping Arthritis Patients in Northern KwaZuluNatal



Introduction

Arthritis, especially osteoarthritis, is a condition of extreme high prevalence in the rural population of Northern KwaZuluNatal. Although no formal research has been conducted in this regard, one only has to speak to any doctor, therapist, nurse or community health care worker working in the Umkhanyakude district to confirm this.

In order to help the large numbers of arthritis sufferers, "joint pain" groups were implemented at each residential clinic in the Ubombo sub-district in February 2003. A physio or occupational therapist leads these groups and the focus is on education, advice and exercise. The groups end with a group exercise session. It has been noted that very few people in the community come only once. They return each month for support, information and exercise. Regular members of the groups were asked whether they felt the groups were benefiting them; they indicated they appreciated meeting people with similar struggles and that the exercises really help them to cope.

These groups were such a success that they outgrew the therapists and it became a challenge to manage the large numbers that attended (up to 70 patients at some clinics). Suggestions were made to start forming smaller groups led by community members, rather than relying solely on a therapist to lead each group.

In order to start these community-led support groups, 18 regular attendees of joint groups attended the World Arthritis Day event at Mseleni Hospital on 3 October 2003. Various people addressed the arthritis patients, but undoubtedly the Patient Partners from the Arthritis foundation made the

biggest impact. The uniqueness of the Patient Partners is that they themselves suffer from arthritis. Therefore the advice they gave to the patients was not from textbooks or lecture notes, but from personal experience.

These 18 attendees became "joint pain" group leaders at their nearest clinics. They are motivated and make better leaders than the therapists due to personal experience and the ability to adapt advice to the situation in their area.

Unfortunately 18 patients were only a drop in the 'arthritis bucket'. Ntombifuthi Seboya, a Patient Partner, acknowledged this and agreed to revisit the area, specifically to conduct workshops for Arthritis patients in the Bethesda Hospital catchment area.

Workshops

The objectives of the workshops, which took place in November 2003, were to:

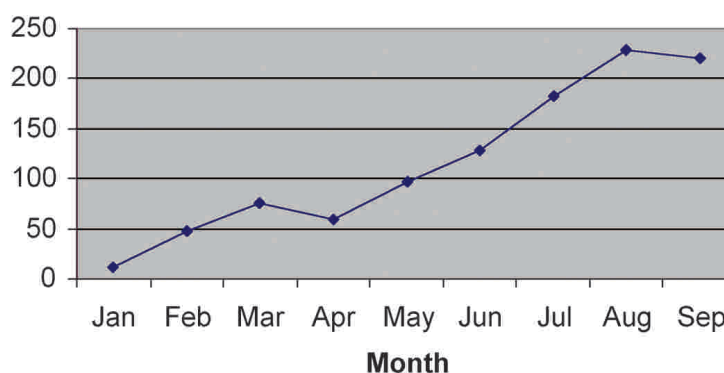
- Empower people suffering from arthritis to improve their quality of life.
- Facilitate ongoing self-help groups - led by community members.

- Improve the awareness of arthritis in the Ubombo sub-district, and
- To provide all patients with channels of support.

The Ubombo sub-district is a large area with mainly gravel roads and poor public transport. Arthritis patients are limited in their ability to travel and most do not have the funds to pay for transport. Two workshops were thus conducted, one in each half of the district, in the Mhlekezi and Ophansi areas respectively. Patients not living nearby were transported from their nearest clinic to the venue, utilising a local taxi company, sponsored by the Rural Health Initiative (RHI).

Patients from Jozini and Mkuze joined the local community at Mhlekezi Community Hall. The Patient Partners were welcomed by more than 150 people, three times more people than had been invited! It was clear that the interest in the community was high as the Indunas of the area were present as well as a prominent Disabled People's Organisation member and the local Community health care workers. They had prepared the hall

Clinic joint group attendance: Jan to Sep 2003



Arthritis workshop 1: Arthritic group members do their stretching exercises



well and despite the rural setting and lack of electricity the venue turned out to be more than adequate.

Motivated by this response, the Patient Partners set out for Ophansi. Arthritis sufferers from Mboza, Madonela, Makhatini and Gedleza joined the local community at Ophansi Community Hall. Once again the community interest was high and more people than expected arrived, although the numbers were more manageable (98 people). All were arthritis patients.

The program in each case started with the handing out of books, pens and pamphlets, sponsored by RHI. The books would enable attendees to take notes and also to record activity of self-help groups in the future. The program covered four main items:

- Introduction and overview of Arthritis
- Treatment options, lifestyle changes, attitude and EXERCISE
- Lifestyle adaptation and joint saving techniques
- Tips on taking medication

Many questions were asked and well answered by the Patient Partners. It was emphasised that Arthritis patients should stand together, help each other and form groups. The attendees

expressed commitment to spread the news and help all arthritis sufferers in the community.

Project goals and outcomes

The main goal of the workshops was to empower 100 arthritis sufferers to manage their own disease and then to continue the positive spiral by starting their own self-help groups. By holding the workshops in the community instead of at the hospital more awareness of arthritis was created.

The fact that more than 150 people arrived at Mhlekezi, including non-patients and prominent community leaders, meant that the aim of this workshop had to be slightly adjusted. The sheer numbers did not allow the in depth attention needed to train patients to lead self help groups. However, awareness of Arthritis in the community was clearly increased tremendously! Hopefully the increased understanding in the community will provide a platform for community support of arthritis sufferers.

The Ophansi workshop fully achieved the project goals. The focus was on taking control of the situation, helping yourself and others and forming groups. This message was clearly passed on to almost 100 Arthritis patients from many communities.

Attendees were encouraged to record attendance and activities of self-help groups. These records are being monitored by the physiotherapist and relayed back to the Arthritis Foundation and the RHI. The therapists will act as a support structure, providing help and assisting with queries, as well as referring new patients to a self-help group in their

community.

Arthritis patients not involved in self-help groups will continue to attend monthly joint pain groups at the clinics. Motivated members will be encouraged to form small groups at the clinics. The members will then be encouraged to continue the small groups at home. Records of attendance, topics and progression will be taken and recorded by Bethesda Physiotherapists.

Future plans

By ongoing support and liaison with the therapy staff of Bethesda Hospital, it is envisaged that Arthritis patients will be able to improve their quality of life. It is hoped that positive spin-offs result and that motivated community members encourage more and more self-help groups to be formed.

The Patient Partners officially train self-help group leaders, but this involves a six-week course in Durban. A basic foundation has been laid in the Ubombo community, and some patients will be nominated to participate in any Arthritis foundation activities to take place in Northern KZN in the future.

The ideal would be to train some motivated Arthritis patients as Community Health care workers, specifically helping Arthritis patients. 🙌

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2005 Update: Mariska continues to pay periodic visits to the self-help groups, which continue to be active in the Ubombo community.