

Work disability is related to the presence of arthritis, not to a specific diagnosis.

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Work disability is a major concern in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). In early undifferentiated arthritis (UA) this fact has not been fully investigated.

Objective: to evaluate work disability and its main associated factors in patients with early arthritis.

Materials and Methods: CONAART (Argentine Consortium for Early Arthritis) is the first early arthritis cohort in Argentina. Patients with at least one or more swollen joints and less than 2 years of symptoms duration were followed up prospectively in 13 rheumatology centers. Social, demographic, familiar, clinical and laboratory data were recollected. At first year and every year X-rays of hands and feet were performed and working status and pharmaco-economic data were recollected. Work status (employed, unemployed, retired) and type of work were assessed by direct interview using a predesigned questionnaire. Patients retired due to age were excluded from final analysis. Categorical variables were compared using chi square and Fisher test and continue variables using student T test and ANOVA. Variables associated to work disability were analyzed by multiple logistic regression analysis.

Results: 848 patients were included, RA (ACR 87' Criteria) = 483 (57%), UA= 365 (43%), 694 (81.8%) were women, median age was 46 years (IQR:35-55.7) and median symptoms duration 7 months (IQR:3-12). Demographic data and disease duration were comparable between both groups. Patients with RA had significantly higher disease activity, worse functional capacity and quality of life, and more severe radiological damage (SENS score) compared to UA patients. Rheumatoid factor positivity was higher in RA vs UA (84.6% vs 34.1% p=0,001). However work disability (unemployed patient) was comparable between groups (RA=21% vs UA=18.6% p=NS). In both groups unemployed patients had higher DAS28, worse HAQ values and less years of formal education (p value <0,005 in all comparisons). Radiological damage was greater in unemployed patients but this difference did not reach statistical significance. In multivariate analysis, disease activity was the main variable associated with unemployment in both groups. No association was found with type of job or physical demand required for it.

Conclusion: Joint involvement was the main cause of work disability in this cohort of patients with early arthritis, independently of the final diagnosis.