

Tackling low back pain: an integrated approach

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Evidence-informed approaches to back pain emphasise a biopsychosocial approach, and the importance of work and activity as key health outcomes. A fundamental aspect to improving outcomes is to address these simultaneously with symptom management, rather than sequentially. This is the defining feature of ‘work-focused healthcare’. It is now possible to outline how common musculoskeletal problems such as back pain can be managed effectively. Broadly, clinicians need to provide three things: an understanding of the problem; symptom management; and, ways to maintain activity and work. Each of these presents specific nuances and clinical challenges to maximise effectiveness. However, this can be described in detail. This overall model fits well with an approach to identifying factors that facilitate recovery, and obstacles that need addressing so they do not delay recovery. The flags framework was devised for this purpose. It focuses on the person, their workplace, and the context in which the person functions. However, simply identifying obstacles is necessary but not sufficient. There needs to be a plan with specific actions on how these are addressed. The easily remembered summary phrase is ‘identify obstacles, develop a plan, then take action’. The stepped-care delivery model is gaining prominence in a cost-conscious environment with increasing need to justify resource use, by focusing on the delivery of only ‘what’s needed when it’s needed’. There is an important role for physiotherapists in the effective management of back pain, by adopting a solution-focused approach. This challenge represents an opportunity for the profession.