



# The experiences of rural osteoarthritic patients

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Osteoarthritis (OA) is one of the most common chronic diseases. Extensive quantitative research exists in this area and best practice is well established. Optimal management of OA is often related to self management by patients, therefore qualitative research can provide an insight into how people make sense of their experiences. This enhances primary health practitioners' understanding of the choices patients make. This study aimed to investigate the experiences of rural OA patients with a particular focus on their experiences with health professionals.

Semi structured interviews were conducted in three rural towns in the Hunter Valley, NSW, that had the following characteristics: population of 1,000—5,000; general practitioner/s (GPs); local hospital and public physiotherapy. Patients were recruited by local GPs and physiotherapists and interviewed by a researcher who was not involved in the local community or local health care. Purposive sampling was utilised to identify key informants. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using a modified grounded theory approach using a constant comparative method until thematic saturation was reached. Nine interviews were completed, including six women and three men with an average age of 72 years. Results revealed:

- **Brittle Self Management:** Participants lived their daily lives with stoicism and determination, were capable self managers and were reluctant to seek treatment. This was tempered by desperation when finally forced to seek treatment.
- **Enduring:** Participants adapted and problem solved to maintain a modified independence and to cope with psychological challenges. Internal thoughts and education were identified as sources of support in this process.
- **Effective Primary Health Care:** Relationships with GPs were positive, with appropriate access, ability to be heard, being encouraged in shared decision making and effective solutions identified.
- **Surgical Challenges:** Postoperative pain and psychological effects resulted in patients being reluctant to undergo further orthopaedic surgery despite reporting positive outcomes from past surgery.
- **Seeking Therapy Solutions:** Participants chose therapy that was valuable to them within limited choices. This included pain management, education and preventative health care. Pain management was particularly important when self management had failed. Delays in access to physiotherapy were often managed in the interim with alternative practitioners.

Osteoarthritis is a chronic disease that causes long term and significant suffering. Patients are effective self managers, who require support from health professionals particularly in periods where self management is failing and patients feel like they are in crisis. Effective primary care is being provided by GPs. Significant time delays limit access to physiotherapy. Alternative practitioners play a useful role in providing additional care to OA patients in rural areas, especially when patients are in crisis.

*For the full report on this project visit our website, follow the link to the Rural Research Capacity Building Program and click on 'view completed projects'*

Janelle is a Physiotherapist working at a rural hospital in the Hunter Valley of NSW. Her interests include optimizing the management of chronic musculoskeletal conditions through services that are responsive to patients needs. Janelle believes that chronic conditions must be better managed in the future in order to cope with the needs of an ageing population.



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