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From Aches and Pains to Timely Care: A Meta-Synthesis of Literature on Help Seeking by People with Arthritis

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Introduction. In Canada, arthritis is the most common cause of severe long-term pain and disability. Early diagnosis and appropriate treatments, inclusive of occupational therapy, are necessary to achieve the best possible health and functional outcomes, however, people with early signs of arthritis may delay seeking help for a variety of reasons.

Objectives. To (a) better understand people's decision-making process for seeking help for osteoarthritis (OA) and inflammatory arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA); (b) synthesize information about individual, social and cultural factors associated with help-seeking among people with arthritis; and (c) identify gaps in scientific knowledge pertaining to patients' help-seeking.

Method. An extensive search of health, behavioural and social sciences databases, not limited by language, yielded 31,146 articles to be screened. Titles and abstracts were screened by two independent reviewers against specific eligibility criteria designed for this review. Full papers were retrieved for a second level of review to determine relevance for this topic, then data extracted. Papers needed to describe or evaluate the help-seeking process and include participants with any type of arthritis.

Results. 301 papers passed the title and abstract screening and after detailed review, 120 (qualitative and quantitative research) papers remained and were clustered under four areas: seeking diagnosis, seeking traditional (Western) health care, seeking complementary and alternative therapies and seeking arthritis-related information to enhance self-management. Four meta-syntheses are underway, and this session welcomes feedback on shaping the interpretation of findings on two topics: a) factors affecting the decision to seek help for early arthritis symptoms, and b) the experience of psychosocial distress during the process of seeking diagnosis and health services.

Conclusion. We present a rigorous review of how existing literature contributes to current theories of help-seeking and decision-making in the early stages of adapting to arthritis. Implications for early occupational therapy intervention will be highlighted.