

## **Summary**

Musculoskeletal diseases (MSD) are very common with people in Western countries, as in the Netherlands. The impact of these diseases is enormous and is involved with high direct costs and production losses. Patient education plays an important role in the treatment of MSD. It helps patients to be aware that staying physically active helps reduce the pain. It appears that patients also have information needs about their conditions. More often patients are using the internet for health information, because the internet is an accessible source of information, but not all information on the internet is reliable.

Voorlichting op Maat has been developed to fill in the strong information needs of patients with reliable and high quality information. VOM is an initiative of the Erasmus MC in Rotterdam, in association with The Health Agency, the Reumafonds and the Reumapatiëntenbond. VOM is an online information system that has been developed by medical specialists and general practitioners. The website gives patients with MSD insight in how they can manage and treat their own symptoms with methods of self management. Patients get a code from their doctor with which they have access to a personal webpage with information on managing their condition.

In this qualitative evaluation of VOM it was examined how an online information system like VOM, fits the information needs of patients with MSD within the primary care. The theoretical concepts 'empowerment' and 'self-efficacy' have been used to examine the experience of patients using VOM. Three focus groups and five individual interviews were conducted with patients with MSD who got VOM from their family physician. A fourth focus group was conducted with patients with MSD who had not gotten VOM from their family physician.

The results of this study made clear that patients with MSD show different seeking behaviour when searching health information on the internet. Patients appear to have different information needs which depend on several factors. There is a distinction between patients with acute musculoskeletal pain and chronic patients: patients with acute pain are searching for a cause of the pain, while chronic patients are searching for a solution.

Patients appear to be positive about VOM. As patients read information about their condition and about how they should manage it by exercising, they recognize their own symptoms and get more knowledge and insight into their own disease. The information on the website makes patients more capable of managing their symptoms because they know what they are allowed to do and what actions they can take upon themselves to reduce the pain. By reading the information on the website, patients get empowered and develop a sense of self-efficacy. Above all, the two theoretical concepts 'empowerment' and 'self-efficacy' appear to be connected to each other. Nevertheless the development of feelings of empowerment and self-efficacy of patients with MSD through VOM has its limits. Beside a need for evidence based medicine, patients also have a need for exchanging experiences with fellow-sufferers. The general practitioner also played an important role in the process of empowerment. Patients, who had gotten VOM from their GP, seem to consider the website as more reliable because their GP had advised them to use it. Patients consider the information on the website an addition to the advice of their GP and not as a challenge to his knowledge.

This evaluation of VOM made clear that patients with MSD indeed have a certain need for tailor made information and that VOM gives patients a better feeling about their disease by filling in this need and by making patients aware they can manage their disease themselves. Nevertheless, the makers of VOM should not consider patients with MSD a homogeneous group with unambiguous information needs. As a result of this study some practical recommendations have been made to improve the fit between the information needs of patients and the information on the website. For an informative website like VOM, it is important to remain in development so that the website will continue to meet the needs of the patients as well as the technological developments on the web.