

Health care professionals can help people with multiple sclerosis stay in work. It all starts with a dialogue

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and Work - At least 700,000 people in Europe have MS. For the majority, their fluctuating health condition has an impact on their employment and career opportunities. Many people find themselves having to change or quit jobs, and as many as half will no longer be working 10 years after diagnosis. Across Europe, employment rates for people with MS are low, ranging between 26 and 42 per cent, while up to a third retire early due to their MS.

Work is Positive for Health and Wellbeing - Staying in or returning to work has various benefits for MS patients and the broader community. 'Good work' has a positive impact on health and wellbeing, especially for people who risk being left behind in society because of their health. In this context, work becomes a health asset. Achieving employment can help prevent disability progression and the onset of comorbidities, and therefore should be viewed as a 'clinical health outcome'.

Supporting Health Care Professionals (HCPs) - This is where the *Ready for Work* project comes in. The co-organisers at the European Multiple Sclerosis Platform (EMSP) and The Work Foundation (TWF) have taken steps to raise awareness among HCPs on how they can best support people with MS to stay at or return to work. The main outcome of this process is the production of a **Guide** and **Checklist** equipping HCPs to initiate positive conversations on work with people with MS. The solutions included in these documents have been developed in consultation with an expert panel. [A summary is provided below:](#)

Why is it important for HCPs to talk about work? HCPs have a central role in helping people with MS understand and manage their condition. As part of a multidisciplinary team, the HCPs have a unique vantage point from which they can support MS patients to become or remain a fully active part of society. This guide will assist in:

Stimulating effective conversations - The quality of communication between patients and HCPs influences adherence, the degree to which patients follow the recommendations of their health care practitioners. It also enables discussions about the possibility of returning to work.

Driving early intervention - Early intervention to prevent people leaving the workforce is crucial. The longer employees are away from work, the harder it is for them to return. Long-term absence can also lead to isolation and inactivity, with negative financial implications. These are all factors that inhibit health. This is why conversations about employment must be integrated into the routine clinical consultation and assessment.

Understanding disclosure - People with MS may only require minor workplace adaptations or more flexible working times in order to excel at their job. Such accommodations can only be negotiated if their employer is aware of their health condition. To disclose, or not, is a personal decision- but to access support, it may be a discussion people need to consider having with their employer.

Positive outcomes: Starting a conversation about work can lead to several positive outcomes for the patient:

Independence - For a person with MS, independence is closely linked to recovery goals. A positive approach by HCPs on this topic can transform patients' confidence, empowering them. Greater involvement by HCPs could also tackle poor symptom management in the workplace and ultimately help improve employment rates.

Rehabilitation - Rehabilitation can enable people with MS to be fully engaged in daily life as reflects their choices, needs and priorities. HCPs can address people with MS to relevant rehabilitation services.

Work as a clinical outcome - Returning to or staying in work should be considered a clinical health outcome which contributes to recovery and rehabilitation, and ultimately improves quality of life. 'Good work' is characterised by opportunities for learning, autonomy, variety, control and discretion, positive social relations, security, fairness and

feeling rewarded for your effort. Good work will often come with a range of financial and social benefits, and is positive for the individual and the community, as well as the health system.

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Ready for Work Expert Panel

Members of the Expert Panel are:

HCPs:

- Professor Jürg Kesselring, Valens Rehabilitation Centre, Switzerland
- Professor Eva Havrdova, MS Centre, Prague
- Professor Sven Schippling, Neurologist, University Hospital Zurich, Switzerland
- Daphne Kos, Faculty of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences, KU Leuven, Belgium and RIMS (Rehabilitation in MS)
- Vicky Matthews, MS Nurse Specialist, United Kingdom

Other Experts:

- Frédéric Destrebecq, European Brain Council, Belgium
- Graham Halsey, Well Working Matters, United Kingdom
- John Golding, Past President of EMSP, Norway
- Denisa Paslaru, Blogger and Patient Representative