Investing in work ability of patients with IBD: results of a pilot project ACTIV84WORK (ACTIVATE FOR WORK)

INTRODUCTION Symptomatic inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) (e.g., diarrhoea, urgency, incontinence, and/or fatigue) often make it difficult to actively participate in the workplace and commute to and from work, especially during flare-up periods. Activ84Work was a pilot project to stimulate professional activity and reduce absenteeism in IBD patients by providing them with more flexible working conditions, including teleworking.

METHODS Starting in April 2015, IBD patients were recruited for participation by a patient association and the gastroenterology department at University Hospital Leuven. Interested patients were contacted for screening and follow-up throughout the program. Both employees and their employers were followed over a six-month period. The first and last contacts were face-to-face meetings with employees and employers. Five intermediate contacts with employees were conducted by phone or email. The project was evaluated from three perspectives: benefits of teleworking for the employee, benefits for the employer, and the effect on society by measuring absenteeism.

RESULTS Between April 2015 and October 2016, 71 patients showed interest, 19 were eligible to participate, and 14 completed the program. All patients expressed their enthusiasm for teleworking and other tailored and flexible working conditions. Interviews indicated that removing work-related stress factors such as not having a toilet nearby resulted in employees feeling much more at ease. For most patients, this led to lower absenteeism, higher work ability, and lower costs for employers and society. The project was viewed positively by employees and employers alike. More openness was created between both parties and the taboo on the disease was lifted, which had an overall positive impact on patients’ work-life balance.

DISCUSSION This pilot project showed that teleworking and flexible working hours improved professional activity among IBD patients. The results could be used to inspire policy-makers and employers to give maximum support to chronically ill people eager to work.