Early, specialist vocational rehabilitation to facilitate return to work after traumatic brain injury: the FRESH feasibility RCT

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Every year, about 160,000 people in the UK have a traumatic brain injury (TBI), affecting intellectual ability and social skills, and causing emotional problems, which affects the ability to return to work. This is an important rehabilitation goal, but vocational rehabilitation (VR) services are rare and little is known about their effectiveness or whether they represent good value for money. The National Institute for Health Research funded a study to test if it would be feasible to conduct a future large-scale study to determine whether or not VR to support people with TBI in returning to work is clinically effective and cost-effective.

We trained staff in three NHS trauma centres to provide VR. We recruited 78 adults with TBI who intended to return to work/education. Everyone received their usual NHS rehabilitation and half were chosen at random to receive VR as well.

We asked participants to fill in a questionnaire at the start of the intervention and 12 months later. This measured the effects and costs of the VR over and above usual rehabilitation.

We interviewed 30 patients and six employers to obtain their views of the support.

Vocational rehabilitation was valued by recipients. The trial was feasible, but the majority of people who took part had mild brain injury. Two-thirds of the questionnaires were returned at 12 months, allowing us to measure the costs and effects of the VR. However, fewer people in usual rehabilitation responded and those that did tended to be in work, which potentially inflated the estimate of how many people can return to work without specialist help.

A large-scale study is feasible, but ways of recruiting more severely injured people and ensuring that everybody returns their questionnaire need further testing.

We also recommend broadening the outcome measure from just returning to work to ‘work or other activities’.
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This report

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