

Experiences and perceptions of Portuguese chronic low back pain patients` encounters with health professionals

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Approximately 85% to 90% of chronic low back pain episodes in primary care cannot be related to serious pathology, being described as non-specific chronic low back pain (NSCLBP). This disorder involves continuous pain or recurrent flare-ups that are responsible for high levels of distress, disability and work absenteeism.

This study aimed to explore the Portuguese individuals` experiences and perceptions of NSCLBP. An interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to explore the experiences of eight participants, who were recruited purposefully from three Portuguese health sites. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were carried out, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following an inductive process of data analysis, five themes emerged as interrelated parts of an extended account that explored the Portuguese individuals` experiences and perceptions of NSCLBP. This paper explores one theme, which highlighted the clinical encounters between the participants and health professionals.

The findings revealed that Portuguese NSCLBP individuals demonstrate vulnerability, passivity and dependency on health professionals. Seemingly, they accepted an underlying asymmetry in the therapeutic relationship, which may include for example, the acceptance of the physicians` decisions without question in spite of not understanding them. The participants appeared to consider themselves as being disempowered to deal with their disorder, unable to have an active role in the decision-making and establish a partnership with health professionals. The findings indicated an increasing discontent with health professionals` approaches that seemed to be related to an absence of alignment between the participants and the health professionals. This appeared to promote the maintenance of unsuccessful treatments and the abandonment of health care services.

These findings should be considered in terms of theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability. The findings indicated that health professionals should re-think their role in the therapeutic relationship and their models of practice. They also highlighted the need to discuss the adoption of patient-centred approaches in the Portuguese context.

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Ethical Approval

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