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Scandinavian Journal of Rheumatology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/irhe20

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To cite this article: B Hilberdink, F van der Giesen, T Vliet Vlieland, L van Bodegom-Vos & S Van Weely (2021): Implementing enhancements in supervised group exercise for people with axial spondyloarthritis: a hybrid effectiveness–implementation study, Scandinavian Journal of Rheumatology, DOI: 10.1080/03009742.2021.1992845

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03009742.2021.1992845

Published online: 17 Nov 2021.

Implementing enhancements in supervised group exercise for people with axial spondyloarthritis: a hybrid effectiveness–implementation study

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Objectives: The content of supervised group exercise (SGE) for axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA) has hardly changed in recent decades, despite new evidence-based insights to improve SGE quality. This pilot implementation study evaluated the effects and feasibility of enhancements in axSpA-specific SGE in four regions in the Netherlands.
Method: The implemented enhancements included: more high-intensity aerobic exercise; exercise personalization with periodic assessments; and patient education on home exercise. The implementation strategy included a one-day supervisor training course and telephone support. To evaluate effects, aerobic capacity [Six-Minute Walk Test (6MWT)], physical functioning [Ankylosing Spondylitis Performance-based Improvement (ASPI); improved/not improved], health status [Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society Health Index (ASAS HI) questionnaire], and home exercise engagement [Short QUestionnaire to ASsess Health-enhancing physical activity (SQUASH)] were assessed at baseline and after one year in 60 participants. Changes were analysed with the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. To evaluate feasibility, a survey of participants and semi-structured interviews with four SGE supervisors assessed uptake and satisfaction with the enhancements.
Results: Aerobic capacity increased significantly and 35% of participants improved functioning, whereas health status and home exercise engagement did not change. The participants' survey and supervisors' interviews showed that high-intensity aerobic exercise was implemented successfully, exercise personalization and periodic assessments were implemented partially, and patient education was not implemented at all. Most participants were satisfied with the changes.
Conclusions: After this pilot implementation, SGE enhancements were only partially implemented. Nevertheless, aerobic capacity improved significantly and satisfaction with accomplished changes was high. Nationwide implementation would require adaptations to improve feasibility.

Axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA) is a chronic inflammatory disease that primarily affects the axial skeleton and is characterized by inflammatory back pain and stiffness (1, 2). Exercise has proven positive effects on symptoms, spinal mobility, cardiorespiratory fitness, and physical functioning in patients with axSpA (3–9). Moreover, it was found that supervised group exercise (SGE) is more beneficial than unsupervised, individual exercise (9–12). Thus, since the early 1990s, SGE for patients with axSpA has been implemented in many countries, including the Netherlands, where local patient associations affiliated with the Dutch Arthritis Society currently organize 56 axSpA-specific exercise groups in 17 regions (13). The delivery of SGE has hardly changed over the past few decades, still comprising once-weekly sessions with a relatively long duration, mainly focusing on mobility and strengthening exercises (13–17). This is in contrast to recommendations in the literature, which state that more attention should be paid to high-intensity aerobic exercise (4–9, 14, 18–22), better exercise personalization based on periodic assessments (10, 23–27), and educating patients about home exercise and about general, health-enhancing physical activity (3–5, 10, 28, 29).

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Accepted 11 October 2021

DOI: 10.1080/03009742.2021.1992845

Implementing these elements could enhance the effectiveness of SGE, particularly regarding aerobic capacity, functioning, and weekly exercise engagement. Studies have shown that the addition of (high-intensity) aerobic exercise can improve functioning and aerobic capacity (4, 9, 14, 19, 21), which is beneficial because of the increased cardiovascular risk in axSpA (7, 18). Furthermore, both exercise personalization and patient education on exercise can improve the overall potential for effectiveness (3, 10, 24) and increase weekly exercise engagement (3, 23, 25–27, 29).

It seems justified to implement these enhancements, yet it appears that knowledge about the feasibility of implementing them is scanty. One recent study, described in an abstract (30), involved a pilot implementation of comparable enhancements in four axSpA-specific exercise groups in Switzerland. Satisfaction levels were high, but it was suggested that the intervention should be made less extensive to improve feasibility (30). These findings may not be fully generalizable to the Netherlands, as implementation strategies need to be tailored to a particular context, addressing specific barriers (30, 31).

In the Netherlands, it seems appropriate to focus the implementation strategy on SGE supervisors. The knowledge and skills of supervisors appear to be very important in optimizing exercise behavior of people with axSpA (20, 23, 31) and are crucial for implementing the desired SGE enhancements. However, in the Netherlands, 75% of axSpA-specific SGE supervisors had no postgraduate training related to rheumatology (13). Successful implementation strategies in other populations, i.e. in people with rheumatoid arthritis (32) and osteoarthritis (33), have also mainly focused on training exercise supervisors.

Given the lack of knowledge, this pilot implementation aims to evaluate the effects and feasibility of implementing enhancements in axSpA-specific SGE, prior to a nationwide implementation in the Netherlands. To evaluate effectiveness, changes in various patient outcomes were assessed, and to evaluate feasibility, both the extent to which the supervisors applied the enhancements and the experiences and satisfaction of participants were examined.

Method

Design

A hybrid effectiveness–implementation type 2 design was used, because of the dual focus on both the effectiveness and the feasibility of this pilot implementation. A hybrid study design can speed up the scientific progress and facilitate the translation of research findings into routine practice (34, 35). The implementation process started in 2015 in one region where axSpA-specific SGE was delivered, followed by three more regions in 2017. After a baseline survey among the participants, all involved SGE supervisors participated in training and were urged to apply the proposed enhancements to their SGE. After 1 year, in 2018, an evaluation survey among participants and interviews with supervisors were used.

The study complies with the Declaration of Helsinki and obtained ethical approval from the Leiden University Hospital Ethical committee [P14.326]. The guidelines of the Standards for Reporting Implementation Studies (StaRI) initiative were followed for the reporting of this pilot implementation study (36).

Intervention and implementation strategy

The intervention to be implemented included: (i) more focus on high-intensity aerobic exercise during SGE, including intensity monitoring (e.g. by heart rate or the Borg scale); (ii) better exercise personalization by performing periodic physical assessments, which provide insight into personal limitations; and (iii) patient education during SGE about home exercise and physical activity (e.g. promotion of an axSpA-specific exercise app, called ‘Bewegen met Bechterew’). To implement these enhancements, a strategy was tailored to the context of axSpA-specific SGE in the Netherlands (13) and therefore targeted the SGE supervisors. They received a one-day training course, a manual for the physical assessments, and telephone support every two months, and a helpdesk (telephone or e-mail) was available on request. During the training, supervisors were educated on the reasons for the enhancements and how to implement them. The training consisted equally of theoretical and practical parts, focusing on axSpA education, exercise recommendations, intensity monitoring, physical assessments, and corresponding exercise personalization. There was some leeway as to how and to what extent each enhancement should be implemented by supervisors.

Setting and subjects

Six local patient associations organizing axSpA-specific SGE in the Netherlands were invited to take part in this pilot implementation project; eventually, four associations accepted the invitation (after much effort from the researchers). These associations organized nine axSpA-specific SGE classes for 130 patients with axSpA, with the involvement of 16 supervisors in total. Classes were held once a week, combining training on land, including sports activities (45–90 min), with hydrotherapy (45 min), mainly focusing on mobility and strengthening exercises, and without any intensity monitoring, periodic physical assessments, or patient education (15).

The inclusion criteria for SGE participants in this study were: (i) being willing and able to participate in this study; (ii) completion of the baseline survey; and (iii) having two physical assessments and/or completing the evaluation survey. A package of numbered surveys and patient information letters was sent to the four local patient associations that organized the SGE. To ensure anonymity, only they

had a file with the link between the numbered surveys and the participants' information. The associations were responsible for inviting the SGE participants to take part in the survey and for arranging the distribution, collection, and return of the surveys.

Measurements

Effects were evaluated in three ways. First, in the evaluation survey, participants rated the changes they experienced in their functioning after the implementation (improved, no change, or worsened). Secondly, the periodic physical assessments included the Six-Minute Walk Test (6MWT), measuring aerobic capacity (37); the Ankylosing Spondylitis Performance-based Improvement (ASPI), measuring physical functioning with three performance-based tests (38); and three spinal mobility tests, namely lateral spinal flexion, tragus-to-wall distance, and chest expansion (39–41). Thirdly, both the evaluation and baseline survey included the Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society Health Index (ASAS HI) questionnaire, which measures participants' health status (42), and the Short QUestionnaire to ASsess Health-enhancing physical activity (SQUASH), which measures participants' weekly physical activity (43).

To evaluate the feasibility, semi-structured interviews with supervisors and evaluation surveys among individual participants were conducted. The interviews were conducted by telephone with the coordinating supervisor from each region (n = 4), and lasted for approximately 45 min per interview. Supervisors were asked about the extent to which each enhancement was implemented, how they experienced its feasibility and its added value, and whether they had future needs. The answers were used to analyse the uptake of enhancements and compare regions. The evaluation survey examined participants' experiences with the programme changes (one five-point Likert scale and two open questions for positive and negative feedback), with each SGE enhancement (10 multiple-choice questions), and with the programme's intensity, options for personalization, and the amount of mobility, strengthening, and aerobic exercise (five multiple-choice questions). Finally, to evaluate the feasibility of implementing the physical assessments, we also analysed which assessment data were collected in the four SGE regions.

Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics were used for the patient characteristics and the results of the evaluation survey, which were reported as frequency (and percentage) or median [and interquartile range (IQR)], where appropriate. From the SQUASH, the weekly frequency and duration of aerobic exercise were calculated. Changes between two time-points in 6MWT, ASPI, the spinal mobility tests, ASAS HI, and SQUASH were analysed with the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. In addition, we calculated how many participants (numbers and percentage) did and did not improve on the ASPI [if at least one item improved by ≥ 20%, whereas none of the items worsened by ≥ 20%, it was classified as improved (38)] and how many improved, had no change, and worsened on the 6MWT over at least 30 m, its minimal clinically important difference (37). Differences in age, duration of disease, and SGE participation between the participants who were and were not included, and between the four regions were analysed with the median test, a non-parametric test comparing medians across two or more independent samples, and differences in gender between these subgroups were analysed with the chi-squared test.

Analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 23.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).

Results

Patients

Of the 130 axSpA-specific SGE participants, 118 completed the baseline survey. Of these, a total of 89 were included, of whom 62 had at least two physical assessments and 60 completed the evaluation survey, as shown in Figure 1. In Region 3, the assessment was organized only once, and in Region 4, the evaluation survey was not sent to the participants owing to the delayed start of the implementation project in that region.

The chi-squared test showed that the proportion of males was higher among the included participants than among the excluded patients ($p < 0.05$), whereas there were no significant differences in age, disease duration, or SGE participation according to the median test.

Of the 89 participants, 71% were male and the median (IQR) age was 61 (55;69) years. The median (IQR) disease duration and SGE participation were 28 (14;36) and 21 (7;25) years, respectively. Table 1 presents the differences in baseline characteristics between the different subgroups; none reached statistical significance with the chi-squared or median tests.

Evaluation of effects

In the evaluation survey, 20 of 60 participants (33%) reported that they experienced improved functioning, 38 (63%) no change, and two (3%) a negative change since the implementation. In addition, the ASPI qualified 20 of 58 participants (35%) as improved and 38 (65%) as not improved; and on the 6MWT, 20 of 56 participants (36%) improved (≥ 30 m), whereas 28 (50%) had no clinically significant change and eight (14%) worsened (≥ 30 m).

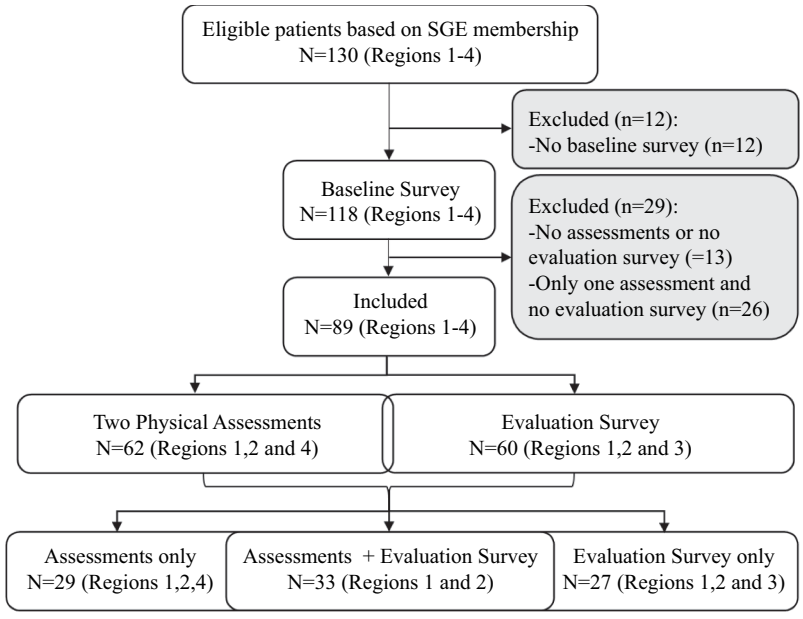

Figure 1. Inclusion flowchart of axial spondyloarthritis patients participating in the pilot implementation of supervised group exercise (SGE) enhancements.

Table 1. Characteristics of the axial spondyloarthritis patients included in this study and the different study subgroups.

	Total (n = 89)	Assessments (n = 62)	Evaluation (n = 60)	Region 1 (n = 33)	Region 2 (n = 27)	Region 3 (n = 16)	Region 4 (n = 13)
Age (years)	61 (55;69)	62 (52;70)	60 (55;68)	59 (51;70)	62 (57;71)	60 (55;64)	62 (54;70)
Gender, male	63 (71)	45 (73)	43 (72)	25 (76)	18 (67)	9 (56)	11 (85)
Disease duration (years)	28 (14;36)	29 (12;38)	26 (16;35)	28 (10;40)	29 (17;34)	26 (23;30)	30 (14;40)
SGE participation (years)	22 (9;25)	21 (9;25)	23 (11;27)	19 (8;25)	25 (9;28)	23 (20;27)	21 (13;25)
Medication use							
Painkiller*	19 (22)	11 (18)	15 (25)	6 (18)	5 (20)	6 (38)	2 (15)
NSAID	47 (54)	35 (58)	31 (52)	21 (64)	15 (60)	4 (25)	7 (54)
bDMARD	8 (9)	5 (8)	6 (10)	1 (3)	3 (12)	2 (13)	2 (15)
sDMARD	13 (15)	7 (12)	9 (15)	5 (15)	4 (16)	3 (19)	1 (8)
None	20 (23)	14 (23)	13 (22)	6 (18)	4 (16)	5 (31)	5 (39)

Data are shown as median (interquartile range) or n (%).
*Acetaminophen or opioid painkillers.
SGE, supervised group exercise; NSAID, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug; bDMARD, biological disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug; sDMARD, synthetic disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug.

These results are presented in Figure 2. Furthermore, Table 2 shows a statistically significant improvement in the 6MWT and a small but statistically significant worsening in tragus-to-wall distance (both p-values < 0.05). No statistically significant changes over time were found in the other two spinal mobility tests, in the ASPI performance-based tests, in health status (ASAS HI), or in the frequency and duration of aerobic exercise (all p-values > 0.05).

Implementation activities

It proved difficult to plan the one-day training with the supervisors, which resulted in four different training days being held in order for all 16 supervisors to be able to attend one training day. Regarding the execution of physical assessments, the 6MWT was used in all regions and the ASPI and mobility tests in three of the four regions. The time interval between assessments differed between regions: there were 12, 6, and 9 months between baseline and (first) follow-up physical assessments of participants in Regions 1, 2, and 4, respectively. Region 3 organized assessments just once. During the telephone support (every two months), supervisors mainly needed advice on personalization of exercise and intensity monitoring. The helpdesk was used only once: Region 2 had questions about the correct use of the Borg scale to monitor exercise intensity.

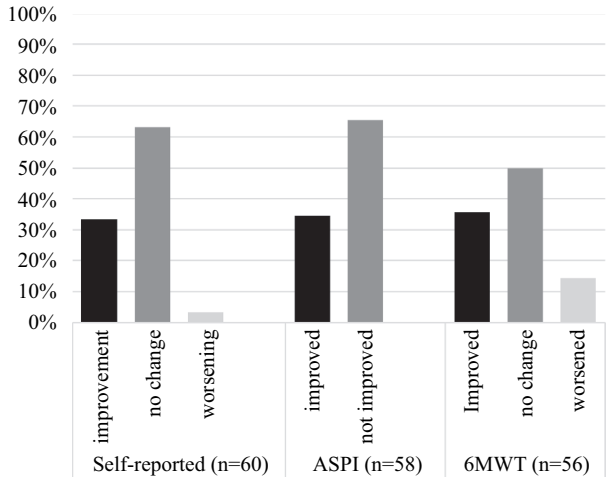

Figure 2. Proportion of participants with (and without) improvement in self-reported functioning on the Ankylosing Spondylitis Performance-based Improvement [ASPI; improvement = one item improving by ≥ 20% and none worsening by ≥ 20% (38)] and the Six-Minute Walk Test [6MWT; change = ≥ 30 m difference (37)].

Evaluation of feasibility

Supervisors' interviews. The semi-structured interviews were performed with SGE supervisors from each region (n = 4): one of these four was male, they were between 28 and 56 years old, and they had between 8 and 30 years of experience with axSpA-specific SGE. All supervisors experienced an increase in the quality of SGE, mainly due to higher exercise intensity and more variation, especially after the initial physical assessments. Regarding the three enhancements, the following findings were reported.

1. High-intensity aerobic exercise: All supervisors indicated that this was implemented successfully, e.g. by using more aerobic exercises in circuit training and by increasing intensity (getting more out of breath), and it was considered the most important enhancement. One supervisor noticed that the participants were more focused on the exercises. To monitor exercise intensity, heart rate monitors only were implemented in one region, aiming at a heart rate of 70% of the theoretical maximum (220 minus age); two regions used a Borg scale owing to the limited availability of heart rate monitors, and in one region intensity monitoring was not applied at all as it was considered impractical.
2. Exercise personalization with physical assessments: All supervisors noted that they sometimes experienced difficulties tailoring the exercises to the large individual differences, e.g. in circuit training. Physical assessments were performed at least once in all regions, but only two regions continued with periodic assessments. The other two regions performed the assessments only once or twice, because they were too time consuming and required additional supervisors. The two regions that continued with the assessments reported having sufficient supervisors and funding available for this. In all regions, an extra supervisor was employed during the assessments. All supervisors experienced that the participants were very positive about the assessments.
3. Patient education: None of the supervisors provided structural education on home exercise during SGE and two supervisors desired to implement it in the future. In Region 1, however, the importance of home exercises is discussed during yearly evaluations of the assessments.

Finally, the supervisors experienced the one-day training course as helpful and suggested repeating the course for further training. As future needs, they mentioned

Table 2. Baseline and follow-up scores and the change over time of measurements evaluating the implementation effects.

	Baseline	Follow-up	Change in score	p
Aerobic capacity: 6MWT (m)	552 (481;595)	569 (513;626)	10 (–19;60)	0.019*
Physical functioning: ASPI				
Picking up six pens (s)	12.0 (10.0;15.8)	11.8 (9.8;14.3)	–0.2 (–2.2;1.7)	0.321
Putting on socks (s)	12.0 (8.6;18.2)	11.5 (8.6;14.3)	–0.4 (–6.0;1.8)	0.249
Getting up from floor (s)	4.9 (3.4;6.7)	4.3 (3.4;6.2)	0 (–1.1;0.5)	0.389
Spinal mobility				
Lateral spinal flexion (cm)	9.5 (5.0;14.3)	9.5 (5.8;14.3)	0 (–1.3;1.0)	0.900
Tragus-to-wall distance (cm)	15.7 (11.9;21.5)	17.5 (13.4;23.3)	0.7 (–0.5;2.6)	0.011*
Chest expansion (cm)	2.5 (1.5;4.0)	2.5 (1.5;4.0)	0 (–0.5;0.5)	0.838
Health status: ASAS HI (score)	5.0 (3.0;8.0)	5.0 (3.0;8.5)	0 (–1, 1.9)	0.157
Exercise frequency: SQUASH (sessions/week)	6 (3;10)	6 (3;9)	0 (–1;2)	0.357
Aerobic exercise: SQUASH (min/week)	375 (225;555)	405 (245;555)	0 (–120;175)	0.560

Data are shown as median (interquartile range).
*Significant improvement ($p < 0.05$) by the Wilcoxon signed-rank test.
6MWT, Six-Minute Walk Test; ASPI, Ankylosing Spondylitis Performance-based Improvement; ASAS HI, Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society Health Index; SQUASH, Short QUestionnaire to ASsess Health-enhancing physical activity.

support in educating and motivating participants to exercise at home, in addition to SGE, and creating a more standardized exercise programme, to reduce the differences in quality between supervisors.

Patients' evaluation survey. Table 3 shows the participants' evaluation of the enhancements. This shows that the majority of participants (58%) considered the new programme an improvement. Regarding the first enhancement, the vast majority of participants was satisfied with the exercise intensity (77%) and with the amount of aerobic (70%), mobility (89%), and strengthening exercise (77%). When heart rate monitoring was used, most found it favourable (93%) and few experienced that it disrupted the exercise (10%). The results regarding the second enhancement show that in all regions, the majority of participants was satisfied with the exercise personalization (88%). The physical assessments were applied at least once in 86% of participants and, among those, the vast majority (94%) considered it favourable. The third enhancement involved the use of patient education, e.g. by promoting an axSpA-specific exercise app. It was found that only 12 of 56 participants (21%) were familiar with the axSpA-specific home exercise app, 10 of whom were from one region, and just one participant (2%) still used it for home exercise.

Regarding the responses to the open-ended feedback of the 60 SGE participants who completed the evaluation survey, 34 (57%) provided positive feedback and nine (15%) provided negative feedback. The most reported positive change was more focus on aerobic exercise (n = 12/60), followed by more focus on active exercises (n = 8/60), and exercising with higher intensity (n = 6/60) and with more variation (n = 6/60). Participants from all regions mentioned more aerobic exercise and higher intensity as positive changes, whereas only two participants mentioned personalization as a positive change, only one mentioned the physical assessments, and none of the participants mentioned anything about patient education. The most reported negative feedback was that some exercises were too heavy (n = 4/60).

Discussion

During this pilot implementation of SGE enhancements, approximately one-third of SGE participants improved their functioning and there was a significant improvement in aerobic capacity, but also a statistically significant, yet very small worsening in one spinal mobility test. There were no significant changes in the other spinal mobility tests, in health status, or in weekly aerobic exercise engagement. The interviews with the supervisors and the evaluation surveys among participants showed that not all enhancements were

Table 3. Evaluation of feasibility and satisfaction with implemented enhancement by supervised group exercise participants.

	Total (n = 60)	Region 1 (n = 19)	Region 2 (n = 25)	Region 3 (n = 16)
Experienced programme changes				
Much worse	0/60 (0)	0/19 (0)	0/25 (0)	0/16 (0)
A little worse	4/60 (7)	1/19 (5)	1/25 (4)	2/16 (13)
The same	21/60 (35)	4/19 (21)	11/25 (44)	6/16 (38)
A little better	24/60 (40)	9/19 (47)	9/25 (36)	6/16 (38)
Much better	11/60 (18)	5/19 (26)	4/25 (16)	2/16 (13)
Enhancement 1: High-intensity aerobic exercise				
Satisfied with exercise intensity	44/57 (77)	16/19 (84)	23/25 (92)	5/13 (39)*
Satisfied with aerobic exercise	39/56 (70)	13/19 (68)	16/23 (70)	10/14 (71)
Satisfied with mobility exercise	49/55 (89)	16/18 (89)	21/23 (91)	12/14 (86)
Satisfied with strengthening exercise	44/57 (77)	14/19 (74)	18/24 (75)	12/14 (80)
Heart rate monitoring is applied	29/59 (49)	19/19 (100)	9/25 (36)	1/15 (7)*
Heart rate monitoring is favourable	27/29 (93)	18/19 (95)	8/9 (89)	1/1 (100)
Heart rate monitoring disrupts exercise	3/29 (10)	2/19 (11)	1/9 (11)	0/1 (0)
Enhancement 2: Personalization by assessments				
Satisfied with exercise personalization	51/58 (88)	16/19 (84)	21/24 (87)	14/15 (93)
Assessment is applied	50/58 (86)	19/19 (100)	19/24 (79)	12/15 (80)
Assessment is favourable	47/50 (94)	17/19 (89)	18/19 (95)	12/12 (100)
Assessment is physically demanding	1/50 (2)	1/19 (5)	0/19 (0)	0/12 (0)
Assessment once yearly is sufficient	40/50 (80)	16/19 (84)	17/19 (90)	7/12 (58)
Enhancement 3: Education on home exercise				
Familiar with axSpA exercise app	12/56 (21)	10/19 (53)*	1/24 (4)	1/13 (8)
Uses axSpA exercise app	1/56 (2)	0/19 (0)	1/24 (4)	0/13 (0)

Data are shown as n/n (%).
*Significant difference between regions ($p < 0.01$) by the chi-squared test.
axSpA, axial spondyloarthritis.

implemented successfully and that the majority of participants was satisfied with the changes. Whereas the supervisors perceived the exercise personalization as difficult to execute, most participants were satisfied with this aspect. Although the implementation of high-intensity aerobic exercise appears to have been successful, the implementation of the exercise personalization and periodic assessments appeared to be more difficult, and patient education about home exercise was not implemented at all.

The effects of this pilot implementation are in line with the realized uptake of enhancements. Implementing high-intensity aerobic exercise appeared the most feasible enhancement and, accordingly, aerobic capacity was the only outcome that significantly improved, whereas patient education about home exercise not being implemented could explain the lack of change in weekly exercise engagement. Although the median change in 6MWT did not exceed the minimal clinically important difference of 30 m (37), 36% of participants did have a clinically significant improvement, compared to 14% who worsened (Figure 2). The improvement in aerobic capacity is promising, with potential benefits for the increased cardiovascular risk in axSpA (7, 18, 21). Even larger effects could be expected if patient education on more frequent (high-intensity) exercise were implemented. Furthermore, the finding that one-third of participants improved their functioning, while only 3% experienced a worsening, is also encouraging and important for long-term SGE engagement. The statistically significant worsening of the tragus-to-wall distance may be a concern, as greater focus on aerobic exercise may have reduced the amount of mobility exercise. However, although a minimal clinically important difference on this test is unknown (41), the change in score is very small and does not appear to be clinically relevant. Moreover, the other two spinal mobility tests are believed to be more responsive (40) and these showed no change at all. Regardless, it is essential that supervisors personalize exercise in case a participant shows any deterioration during the assessments. In that case, linking patient education about home exercises to the assessment results could lead to more improvements and less deterioration in outcomes. Therefore, improving the feasibility of the implementation could further increase the effectiveness of SGE.

To improve feasibility, a more comprehensive implementation strategy with more stakeholders seems warranted to increase implementation success. Similar studies with successful implementation targeted more stakeholders than just supervisors, e.g. patients, rheumatologists, local patient associations, and health insurance companies (30, 32, 33). The current implementation strategy focused mainly on the supervisors, as the expertise of SGE supervisors was considered an important facilitator for the enhancements (13, 15, 20, 23, 31). Before and during a nationwide implementation, it may be desirable to involve all stakeholders to jointly identify potential barriers to implementation and possibilities for coping with them. This could also increase supervisors' willingness to participate, which appeared limited when inviting the patient associations for this pilot study.

A potential barrier to the feasibility of the implementation could have been limited resources. The main implementation activity was the one-day training course for SGE supervisors, whereas other studies with good feasibility used a two- or three-day training course (32, 33). More extensive training could be challenging, as it was already difficult to plan a one-day course, and two regions declined to participate because the supervisors believed that the compensation did not outweigh the time investment. In addition, limited resources (i.e. funding and supervisors) prevented two regions from continuing with periodic assessments, and limited resources could also be an important reason why patient education was not implemented successfully. Similar studies that successfully implemented patient education were able to organize education separately from the SGE sessions (30, 33). Thus, possibilities for more resources should be explored, as well as more cost-effective solutions, e.g. the use of physical therapy students for the assessments or the use of instruction manuals providing education on home exercise (23). Moreover, the currently used home exercise app appears to be outdated and has too little focus on aerobic exercise. Furthermore, with more resources, the participation of supervisors could be better compensated, they could be better trained to implement all enhancements, and there could be more demands and less permissiveness regarding the implementation, which should improve the feasibility (44).

There are a few study limitations to be mentioned. First, although the participating regions were spread well across the Netherlands and there were no differences in patient characteristics between these four regions, there may be limited generalizability. Among the SGE participants, males were more likely to participate, and, compared to previous research (45), the participants represented older axSpA patients with longer disease duration and SGE participation. These characteristics may challenge the implementation of changes and it is therefore promising that even in this group there were some positive effects and satisfaction levels were high. In addition, although the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other countries is not clear, a Swiss study evaluating the implementation of similar enhancements in axSpA-specific SGE found comparable satisfaction levels among participants (30). Furthermore, while the hybrid study design provided useful insights by evaluating both feasibility and effects, the varying availability and time intervals between baseline and follow-up data between regions may have limited the validity of the evaluation of the effects. The final

limitation is the absence of a control group to compare the changes in outcomes over time. Nevertheless, this study provided a lot of useful information for a possible nationwide implementation of the SGE enhancements.

Conclusion

After a one-day training course for SGE supervisors and telephone support, a set of enhancements was partially implemented. Aerobic capacity improved significantly and functioning improved in about one-third of the participants. Most of the participants were satisfied with the applied changes. To further increase the effects and feasibility during a nationwide implementation of the SGE enhancements, an increase in resources and a multifaceted implementation strategy, involving additional stakeholders, would be necessary.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge and thank all participants, coordinators, boards, and guiding therapists from the four included SGE regions.

Funding

The authors also thank the Dutch Arthritis Society for funding and for providing thoughts from the patients' perspective. This work was supported by the Dutch Arthritis Society [grant number BP 14-1-161].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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