INTRODUCTION

- Treating patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) within 3 months of symptom onset leads to significantly improved outcomes compared with delayed therapy[1].
- Unfortunately, many people with RA symptoms wait for a long time before seeking medical attention[2], missing this vital treatment window as a result.
- Interview studies from our research group have shown that several factors including, knowledge and perceptions of RA, the perceived consequences of RA and GP related barriers and drivers, might affect help seeking in the general public.
- The current survey study aims to quantify some of the findings from the qualitative research and focuses on the role of information seeking and health literacy.

The role of health literacy in help seeking with the early symptoms of RA

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PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Participants
- Current results based on 669 returned surveys.
- 29% males & 71% females aged between 18 and 90 (mean = 55).

Perceptions of seriousness, urgency and impact
- The symptoms of bowel cancer and angina were considered to be significantly more serious, to have more impact on daily life and to require medical advice more urgently than the symptoms of RA, especially if only stiff and painful joints were described.
- The higher the level of HL, the more serious people tended to consider RA symptoms to be and the more likely they were to seek help quickly. Specifically higher levels of Communicative HL seem to have an impact (see also figure 1).

Health literacy and information seeking
- The higher the level of HL, the more likely the person is to seek information about the symptoms of RA both before seeing the GP and after diagnosis.
- High levels of critical and communicative HL seem to drive this search for information.

Drivers and barriers to help seeking
- Respondents would be most likely to seek help from their GP if
  - symptoms appeared very rapidly
  - symptoms spread to other parts of the body.
  - they were not able to control the symptoms themselves.
  - they were struggling with every day things or work.
  - symptoms had an impact on their existing illness.

DISCUSSION

- The symptoms of RA are considered to be less serious, to have less of an impact on daily life and to require help less urgently compared to illnesses such as bowel cancer.
- HL seems to have an impact on perceptions of urgency and seriousness, especially communicative HL. People with high levels of communicative and critical HL are further more likely to seek out information about symptoms of RA.
- The barriers and drivers most frequently endorsed in the current survey study echo those mentioned by interviewees in qualitative interviews.

Implications for development of interventions
- Health interventions need to be suitable for people at all levels of HL and different materials for different levels might need to be considered.
- The seriousness of RA and the need for urgency need to be highlighted.
- Interventions should encourage people to seek help prior to symptoms becoming so severe that they interfere with daily tasks and discourage self-management of symptoms for longer stretches of time.

REFERENCES

In the context of help-seeking behaviour, health literacy represents: One’s ability to understand and use information, and draw on previously acquired knowledge and skills to make informed decisions on whether to seek medical treatment.

Functional HL represents the ‘ability to read health information; writing ability and access to support networks’ [3]
Communicative HL represents skills which can be used to ‘extract information and derive meaning from different forms of communication and to apply new information to changing circumstances’ [3]
Critical HL represents ‘skills in the information appraisal aspect of health literacy and ability to evaluate the relevance and validity of different kinds of health information’ [3]