

Rheumatoid arthritis and archaeology: a case study

Anonymous member

When I was first diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) I was shocked and horrified – in my mind that was something ‘old’ people had, I was in my 40s! I didn’t really appreciate the difference between osteoarthritis (well known to us archaeologists) and RA. I have since learnt that whereas osteoarthritis results from the mechanical wear and tear of specific individual joints, RA is an auto-immune condition, a systemic whole-body attack of joints and internal body organs by the immune system.

Osteoarthritis is more common in men before the age of 45, women over the age of 45 and rheumatoid arthritis is up to 3 times more common in women

(www.arthritis.com). Rheumatoid arthritis is thought to affect in the region of 400,000 people in the UK over the age of 16 (www.versusarthritis.org).

Fortunately my diagnoses caught the RA early and I am on medication that, for the most part, keep the symptoms at bay. However, ‘flares’ do occur when a physical or psychological trigger (think stress, over straining joints, exposure to common viruses) can result in a sudden surge of symptoms. I know this can be confusing for colleagues, when one day I can seem absolutely the fine, yet the next day claim to be in agony with painful joints, fatigue, ‘brain fog’ or any combination thereof – a situation probably all too familiar for many others coping with an ‘invisible illness’.

My next question was how is this going to affect my work? I made the transition from field to post-ex many years ago, thankfully, as that has made management of my RA symptoms far more manageable. I have had to adopt a flexible approach to working hours, getting extra time in when I am feeling well to allow for periods of flare up when I may need to cut back my working hours. I no longer commute however when I travel I avoid peak times so that I know I can get a seat rather than have to stand and risk aggravating joint pain. In any work scenario I would suggest is worth asking about adjusting tasks, for example even small things like that fact that I am able to take regular short breaks from repetitive tasks and avoid any heavy lifting can help.

I have made adjustments to the equipment I use too, like making sure I have an appropriate chair and ergonomic keyboard; I may yet try a standing desk. To try and prevent any worsening in my hand joints I am looking into using specific mouse types such as rollerball or an upright version or even the use of dictation software. I do a lot of data entry so currently have a keyboard with a separate number panel to minimise how much I stretch my fingers and to reduce movement of my arm and neck. Hot-desking in an office therefore would be problematic for me over a long period.

I am fortunate that I work for a large archaeological organisation who have disciplinary and grievance policies that adjust for people like myself who may need additional time for medical appointments. RA can be covered under the Equalities Act and it is important not to inadvertently discriminate for any disability related absence. For example, I require regular blood tests while the RA is under control and a consultant’s appointment every 4-6 months. Having an over-active immune system sadly doesn’t

make someone with RA less immune to coughs, colds and other viruses. One of the ironies of RA means that the immune system is so preoccupied with attacking its own body it is pretty rubbish at actually doing its job, meaning common infections can take longer to recover from than for other people. Insomnia and fatigue can also be symptoms for people with RA, and we are also likely to have or to develop other conditions. With all this in mind I did hesitate over whether to disclose my condition to my employer, however I am glad that I did as I now feel confident that I am able to work in a safe environment and to the best of my ability.

Everyone's experience of RA is different and it is still a relatively poorly understood condition. Where people with RA feel their condition is having a negative impact on their work this can result in anxiety and poor mental health and in the early days I certainly felt this way. Ultimately it is in the interests of employers to support and retain skilled staff and to create a positive workplace culture that benefits all employees and the company. I understand it can be difficult for colleagues to appreciate the changeable nature of RA and how the symptoms present. The unpredictability of RA frustrates me immensely and I am still learning about the condition. Like me, many people are diagnosed with RA in the 'prime' of their working life. Although it is still not well understood, early diagnosis and medication has been shown to have a positive impact and many people will be able to continue to work for as long as they choose – I certainly hope to!

There are a great number of resources available, for individuals and for employers, in particular the government funded access to work scheme which supports adaptations at work for people with health conditions. Included below are some links for more information about rheumatoid arthritis.

<https://www.nras.org.uk/>

<https://www.versusarthritis.org>

<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>