The impact of Rheumatoid Arthritis on quality-of-life assessed using the SF-36: A systematic review and meta-analysis

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Background
We have demonstrated in a previous systematic review that Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) impacts on all aspects of Quality of Life (QoL), with detrimental effects observed in all 8 health domains of the Medical Outcomes Study 36-item Short-Form Health Survey (SF-36). The recent shift in the paradigm of RA management towards early combination therapies may have altered the impact of RA on QoL. We therefore performed an updated systematic review examining the impact of RA on QoL measured using the SF-36, and are the first to present meta-analysed data showing QoL in RA.

Methods
Medline and Embase were searched using the terms Rheumatoid Arthritis or RA and Quality of Life or SF-36. Observational studies were included that reported mean and standard deviation scores for all SF-36 domains in RA patients. Domain scores across studies were combined within a meta-analysis to provide summary scores for each domain. The clinical and psychosocial variables associated with QoL in RA were discussed qualitatively.

Results
A total of 33 studies were eligible for inclusion in the review, including 22,473 patients.

Reduced physical QoL was associated with increased disease activity, physical disability, pain and fatigue; reduced mental QoL was generally associated with increased disease activity, pain, fatigue, and increasing age.

Conclusions
RA impairs QoL, particularly the physical components of the SF-36. QoL is associated with several disease characteristics, including pain and fatigue. RA patients score markedly lower in both physical and mental domains than healthy populations, and score similarly to or lower than patients with other chronic conditions. Optimal care of RA patients requires a broader clinical perspective, taking into account patients’ physical and mental health needs.