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Lessons for human pain in animal suffering

Research into pain management in animals offers powerful insights into how to best treat pain in humans who cannot communicate their level of suffering - such as newborns and even dementia patients, according to a leading veterinary anaesthetist.

Writing in the latest edition of *Australasian Anaesthesia*, published every two years by the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists, Dr Gabrielle Musk says animals, like some vulnerable groups of people, cannot directly self-report or verbalise their pain experience.

“Historically animals were considered similar to neonates [infants under four weeks of age] in their inability to experience the sensory and emotional aspects of pain: neonates either did not feel pain or had an altered perception of pain,” Dr Musk writes in her article. It is now thought that these historical theories are inapplicable to animals and neonates.

Dr Musk said while animals were better at adapting to pain than humans, there were key lessons that could be learnt from understanding their signals of pain.

“There is a lot that can be learnt from animal studies when it comes to managing pain in people, especially people who are unable to express their levels of pain themselves,” she said.

Pain management, she said, was an inexact science and an area that needed more research.

“The aim, whatever the species, is to get the balance right between efficacy and safety in providing pain relief.

“Freedom from pain is an ultimate goal and it is important to refine the scales that are used to measure pain so that there is appropriate relief for people who are unable to report their experience themselves.”

Australasian Anaesthesia, known colloquially as the “Blue Book” contains articles from authors from Australia and New Zealand. The publication can be accessed [here](#).

Other research highlights include:

- Fitness is a better way of predicting safe anaesthesia outcomes than age;
- The rising rate of obstetric haemorrhage is directly related to the increasing maternal age and a steady increase in reliance on caesarean sections
- The troublesome rise in the abuse of opioids – discharge prescriptions of the powerful drug oxycodone has trebled at St Vincent’s Hospital in Sydney between 2005-2012 – with little reduction in the prescription of Panadeine Forte

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