

Thursday October 27, 2011

Causes of pain: physical or psychological?

Where musculoskeletal pain comes from – the muscles, the brain or both – will be debated at a three-day meeting of about 140 pain specialists from Australia and New Zealand in Canberra, beginning tomorrow.

While musculoskeletal pain due to an obvious injury or tumour often can be easily diagnosed and treated, other ongoing chronic pain is more difficult to pinpoint and treat.

Pain specialists are divided into two camps: those who think such pain is triggered in the muscles, joints, ligaments and other body parts, and should be treated through injection therapy and other treatments targeting that body part; and those who believe the pain is caused by the way the brain perceives pain, which can be triggered by other psychological and social stressors. In the latter case, the treatment is less reliant on achieving a diagnosis and more on helping the person change behaviours.

The Faculty of Pain Medicine (FPM) of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists is hosting a meeting to discuss this and other pain matters. Key speakers include:

- **Professor Lars Arendt-Nielsen:** an international expert on musculoskeletal pain who is the founder and director of the International Center for Sensory-Motor Interaction at Aalborg University in Denmark.
- **Associate Professor Milton Cohen:** who will discuss chronic widespread pain which can be triggered by emotional or environmental factors, such as anxiety, depression or stress, rather than an underlying disease. Treating such pain can involve a holistic approach, such as clinical psychology, changing exercise patterns, drug therapy or taking people off medication. Failing to find an obvious cause for chronic pain can be a challenge for both the patient and the clinician. Associate Professor Cohen, who is the FPM Director of Professional Affairs, will discuss overcoming these and other challenges.
- **Professor Lorimer Moseley:** who thinks that many factors can contribute to the brain's perception of threat to body tissue and it is this perception that determines pain. He explains that someone with years of back pain can feel increased pain simply watching another person lifting a box. He helps patients to slowly retrain the way their brain responds to these factors. He has done many experiments that suggest when people understand pain is not only about the tissues of the body, they then improve. Professor Moseley works at the Sansom Institute for Health Research at the University of South Australia and at Neuroscience Research Australia, Sydney.

- **Professor Nikolai Bogduk:** who is a proponent of injecting into the nerves near a painful joint to stop pain signals being sent to the brain. Professor Bogduk works at the Royal Newcastle Centre.
- **Professor Kathy Eagar:** who will talk about how to measure pain outcomes on a routine basis so that clinicians can learn from each other and improve pain management to help patients better manage their daily living and return to work. Professor Eagar is director of the Australian Health Services Research Institute at the University of Wollongong.

For more information about the conference, or to interview any of the speakers, please contact ANZCA Media Manager, Meaghan Shaw, on +61 408 259 369 or email mshaw@anzca.edu.au.