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Childhood pain not make-believe, expert says

Schools need to be vigilant in detecting young people with persistent pain such as headache or stomach ache as it was often a tangible indicator of a troubled child, according to a leading paediatric pain specialist.

Dr Meredith Craigie from the pain management unit at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, who also heads a paediatric pain unit at Flinders Medical Centre, will tell the Faculty of Pain Medicine (FPM) spring meeting “Internal Pain is not Eternal Pain” today (Sunday) that chronic pain in children and adolescents should never be dismissed or disbelieved.

Chronic pain is pain that is experienced frequently for at least three – six months.

“The pain a distressed young person feels is very real,” Dr Craigie said ahead of her presentation.

“But in some cases parents and doctors become disconnected from that pain after they can’t find a physical reason for it and they can think it is an ongoing ploy to miss school.

“We need to be vigilant in schools in picking up these symptoms because there will be a reason for it - children and adolescents who suffer abuse, trauma or parental neglect are more likely to develop persistent pain symptoms.”

Pain was a physical response to stimuli which may legitimately be emotional and psychological distress as well as physical causes, she said.

“Emotions can cause real pain including physical symptoms such as severe cramping, nausea, vomiting, even sweating and dizziness – the same symptoms as gastroenteritis.

“It is vital that a young person who suffers from chronic pain is properly investigated – we have to go hunting for clues and try to unravel what is going on, their pain has a cause.

“There may be multiple underlying factors there so we need to be exploring all aspects of that person and look more broadly.”

Dr Craigie said multiple international studies showed up to 25 per cent of school-aged children suffered from chronic pain or recurrent pain and believed that figures in Australia were comparable, with headache, musculoskeletal and abdominal pelvic pain the most common complaints. A small number become incapacitated by their pain.

“Detecting pain early is an opportunity to intervene and change young lives,” she said.

“If you are disabled by pain in adolescence you run a much higher risk of developing persistent pain syndromes later in life.”

For further information or to interview Dr Craigie please contact ANZCA Media Manager Ebru Yaman on +61 3 8517 5303, +61 408 259 369 or email eyaman@anzca.edu.au. Follow us on Twitter [@ANZCA](https://twitter.com/ANZCA)