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Mental illness complicates chronic pain treatment, conference hears

Common antidepressants can sometimes interfere with the effect of pain medicines, although prescribing doctors and patients can sometimes be unaware of the interaction, a leading pain specialist has told a meeting in Leura, NSW.

Dr Newman Harris, who is a clinical senior lecturer at the Pain Management and Research Centre at the Royal North Shore Hospital, told the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists' Faculty of Pain Medicine Spring Meeting that chronic pain and depression are inextricably linked, and each interferes with the successful treatment of the other.

Mental illness is present in up to three-quarters of all chronic pain patients and doctors need to be vigilant about the effects of common antidepressants on pain medications, Dr Harris said.

The meeting heard even over-the-counter medications, such as those including codeine, could be dramatically less effective when taken with certain antidepressant medications. Some academics have written of both the magnifying or alternatively minimising effects some antidepressants have on opiate medicines, sometimes with tragic results, he said.

It can be more complicated when multiple medications are used, Dr Harris warning that "combining two types of antidepressants can lead to unintended overdose" with pain medicines which are producing reduced effectiveness due to drug interactions. "Without careful management patients could be swallowing too many pain killers – which can lead to overdose – because they aren't receiving any effect."

The meeting also heard that at least 20 per cent of children with an autism spectrum disorders suffer from chronic pain, yet there was very little population-based research into its prevalence or its treatment in this population.

Dr Paul Vroegop, a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist from Counties Manukau District Health Board in Auckland, New Zealand told the meeting that the lack of research into altered sensory and pain processing for young people with autism was a barrier to their assessment and treatment.

For more information or to interview Dr Harris or Dr Vroegop please contact ANZCA Media Manager Ebru Yaman on +61 408 259 369 or eyaman@anzca.edu.au. Follow us on Twitter @ANZCA.