



MEDIA RELEASE

Pain sufferers wait average six months to see specialist: new study **Thursday March 11, 2010**

Chronic pain sufferers are waiting an average of six months to see a pain specialist in the public system with many waiting as long as 12 months following referral by their GP, according to a study to be released later this year.

The Australian Pain Society's interim report, "Waiting in pain", highlights one of the key problems for people in pain that will be addressed at **the National Pain Summit** being held from **9am today (Thursday, March 11)** in the **Great Hall, Parliament House, Canberra**. The Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, **the Hon. Nicola Roxon**, is opening the Summit.

"With one in five Australians suffering chronic pain these waiting periods are unacceptable," said world-renowned pain medicine specialist, Professor Michael Cousins, who is Chair of the Summit steering committee.

"Chronic pain is the third most expensive health problem in Australia today (after cardiovascular disease and cancer).

"Today we will be finalising a National Pain Strategy that seeks to address the many problems faced by people with chronic pain as well as those with acute pain and cancer pain.

"The strategy is closely aligned with the Federal Government's healthcare reform proposals and has the potential to halve the \$34 billion cost to the economy of chronic pain, if implemented within a proper policy framework."

The "Waiting in pain" project, led by pain specialist Dr Malcolm Hogg, found that people in regional areas had far worse access to specialised pain services than people in city areas.

"Access is limited throughout Australia but is particularly poor for regional areas and for publicly funded patients," said Dr Hogg, who is the head of Pain Services for Royal Melbourne Hospital.

"The biggest barriers that have been identified by established pain services is lack of funding and excess demand, creating untenably long waiting lists for many services."

"There is an urgent need for expansion of the sector via increased funding to allow earlier access, increased effectiveness of patient, GP and specialist education, and more research directed towards optimal pain management."

The summit is being led by the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists, Faculty of Pain Medicine, the Australian Pain Society and Chronic Pain Australia in collaboration with inaugural supporters' MBF Foundation and the Pain Management Research Institute.

It will bring together an unprecedented gathering of more than 200 leading authorities in pain medicine, other healthcare professionals, work safety, insurer, industry and consumer groups.

The Summit will be addressed by several leading international experts in pain management and include discussions to reach a unified position on the recommendations and implementation of a world-first National Pain Strategy.

Swimming great, Kieren Perkins, will speak about his experiences in caring for a chronic pain sufferer (his wife Symantha) and respected economist Helen Owens will give a patient's perspective on living with and managing chronic pain.

Professor Cousins said more than 36.5 million working days were lost each year due to chronic pain costing the economy and employers \$11.7 billion annually in productivity losses and healthcare expenditure according to the High Price of Pain report conducted by Access Economics for the MBF Foundation in collaboration with the University of Sydney Pain Management Research Institute.

The Chair of the MBF Foundation steering committee and chief medical officer of Bupa Australia, Dr Christine Bennett, said: "I strongly support the goals of the National Pain Summit - to address the enormous burden of chronic pain on individuals and the community.

"Chronic pain is one of the least recognised, hidden health problems in Australia, and worldwide, affecting increasing numbers of people - many of whom suffer in silence.

"The Summit comes at a critical time of national health reform which provides an ideal opportunity to deliver many of the changes needed to improve the lives of people living with pain. It is imperative that we move ahead with its recommendations within an effective policy framework.

"The prevalence of chronic pain, its impact on individuals and the community as well as the relationship between chronic pain and socio-economic disadvantage, makes it a critical public health issue.

"Chronic pain has the ability to destroy all aspects of people's lives – and this should not be tolerated in any civilised society."

PLEASE NOTE: Professor Michael Cousins (Chair of the National Pain Summit steering committee) and other speakers will be available for interview during the National Pain Summit. A summary of outcomes will be distributed at the conclusion.

To speak to Professor Cousins or Dr Hogg, please contact National Pain Summit media manager Clea Hincks on 0418 583 276 or see www.painsummit.org.au.



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