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Pain medicine recognition great news for those in pain

Up to one in five New Zealanders estimated to suffer from chronic pain will be the big winners of a Medical Council of New Zealand decision to recognise pain medicine as a specialty in its own right, say pain medicine specialists.

The Medical Council has accredited pain medicine as a scope of practice in New Zealand, giving formal recognition to this medical specialty and its associated qualification. The new scope and qualification come into effect on December 3 this year. The accreditation follows a lengthy application process undertaken by the Faculty of Pain Medicine (FPM) of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists.

“This keenly awaited decision recognises the importance of pain medicine as a field requiring specialised skills and qualities to address the epidemic of people suffering in pain in our communities,” FPM Dean Associate Professor Brendan Moore says. “Pain medicine emphasises a holistic, all-encompassing approach to the management of pain including the physical, psychological and emotional consequences of this common but poorly understood and under-treated medical problem.

“This puts the practice of pain medicine in New Zealand on the same footing as in Australia, where it has been recognised as a stand-alone specialist qualification since 2005. There is now a single unified training and accreditation system, and qualification, for recognising pain medicine specialist physicians across Australia and New Zealand.

“Australian and New Zealand specialists with backgrounds in anaesthesia, surgery, rehabilitation medicine, psychiatry and general medicine have worked together for 15 years to establish and progress the training, examination and continuing professional development of pain medicine specialists.

“The Medical Council’s decision recognises these achievements and the expertise of New Zealand specialists who have contributed to the development of this specialty in New Zealand, Australia and internationally. Both our immediate past dean and current vice dean are New Zealanders,” Associate Professor Moore says.

FPM Vice Dean, Professor Ted Shipton of Christchurch, says that while New Zealand already has some pain medicine specialists, lack of formal Medical Council accreditation has limited development of the specialty.

“We expect this recognition to lead to a growth of interest in the specialty and more training places opening up here in New Zealand, where such specialists are desperately needed.”

Professor Shipton says pain is the most common reason for patients consulting health care professionals.

“Data from the 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey showed that one in six New Zealanders (16.9 per cent) suffered from chronic pain with other estimates putting the figure at about 20

per cent, an incidence that is even higher among the elderly. This makes chronic pain – which has a profound effect on the sufferer, their family and society as a whole – a critical public health problem in New Zealand.

“The proper management of pain remains one of the most important obligations of a physician. Acute pain has a warning or protective function but, if not managed properly, it becomes chronic pain,” Professor Shipton explains.

“We can now look forward to better care of all New Zealanders who suffer from pain, provided the Ministry of Health and district health boards pick up the challenge to adequately resource and expand acute and chronic pain management services in New Zealand.”

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