



MEDIA RELEASE

Too many children suffering unnecessary pain, say experts

Thursday March 4, 2010

Up to 46% of Australian children with terminal cancer receive inadequate pain relief in their last month of life even though 95% are being treated for their pain, world-renowned pain medicine specialist, Professor Michael Cousins, said today (Thursday March 4, 2010).

Professor Cousins, quoting a newly published study in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, said the findings represented an unacceptable situation that will be addressed as part of the National Pain Summit, to be held at Parliament House Canberra on March 11, 2010.

The study (Heath JA, Clarke NE, Donath SM, McCarthy M, Anderson VA, Wolfe J. MJA 2010; 192 (2): 71-75) conducted at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, found that parents reported that 46% suffered "a lot" or "a great deal" from pain. These results are very similar to those from a study of children in Boston published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2000.

"Much more can be done to help children with cancer pain," said Professor Cousins, who is Chair of the National Pain Summit steering committee.

"It is also true that much more can be done for children experiencing other kinds of pain."

To improve the current situation, children's hospitals and palliative care services need interdisciplinary teams with access to special expertise, including palliative medicine and pain medicine specialists, Professor Cousins said.

A new strategy to develop such teams has just been incorporated into the National Pain Strategy. This will be finalised at the National Pain Summit, to be attended by over 200 healthcare professionals, healthcare organisations, government representatives and consumers.

"The summit will provide detailed strategies that have the potential to ensure that 90% of children with acute pain (e.g. after surgery or after an accident/trauma) and cancer pain, can gain effective relief of their pain," said Professor Cousins, who is Chair of the National Pain Summit Steering Committee.

"In the case of children with chronic (non-cancer) pain, long experience shows that most of these children can be effectively treated, provided they have access to appropriate interdisciplinary services. Such chronic pain includes migraine headache and recurrent abdominal pain."

Key recommendations in the National Pain Strategy also include:

- Instigating better assessments of how physical, psychological and environmental factors impact on children's pain and improving education about the existence of chronic pain in children at all levels – schools, parents and families as well as healthcare professionals.
- Promoting a better understanding of pain in children recognising that physical, psychological and social factors may cause, and result from, chronic pain mandating skilled interdisciplinary assessment and treatment.
- Destigmatising pain. Children often have difficulties communicating what they are feeling which can result in dismissal of complaints by family, teachers and health professionals and teasing or bullying from their peers. This can lead to parental frustration, social anxieties, low self esteem and depression that are hard to diagnose in children and consequently often left untreated.
- Using the wide range of interdisciplinary treatments now available (often in combination). In rural and remote areas, this can be achieved through virtual networks if the strategies are adopted.
- Ensuring interdisciplinary treatment of acute pain to assist with rapid recovery and return to home after surgery and trauma.
- Ensuring effective treatment of acute pain to reduce risk of the development of chronic pain.
- Ensuring effective interdisciplinary treatment of chronic pain in childhood to reduce the risk of chronic pain in adulthood.

“Treatment of pain in children should be at the top of healthcare priorities in any civilised society,” Professor Cousins said.

“This is especially important for the 46% of children dying from cancer who don't get adequate pain relief, causing unnecessary suffering for them and their families.

“There is an urgent need for more research into the prevalence and treatment of pain in children and also for appropriate education and training of healthcare professionals.”

The National Pain 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 University of Sydney Pain Management Research Institute.

Professor Cousins said acute, chronic and cancer pain for people of all ages continued to be shockingly under-treated in Australia as is the case in many countries.

“Children are particularly vulnerable because of their limited ability to express what they are feeling” he said.

Professor Cousins said the costs - physical, psychological and financial - of pain in children were high. These included:

- Costs of multiple, expensive investigations (often excessive due to misunderstandings that, as in adults, chronic pain in children becomes a disease in its own right).
- Impacts on self-esteem, physical fitness and quality of life.

- Impacts on education and loss of vocational potential.
- Persistence of chronic childhood pain into adult life in 30-45% of cases.
- Impacts on other family members requiring additional support services (clinical psychologists, social workers, general practitioners) as a direct result of the child's pain.
- Loss of parental employment time and opportunities.

Professor Cousins said paediatric pain required interdisciplinary assessment by a team of health professionals at primary, secondary and tertiary care levels.

He said specialist pain centres were available in only three children's hospitals in two Australian cities and resources were very limited.

"A major clinical, educational and research initiative in paediatric pain management is long overdue," Professor Cousins said.

"Without this, many children will continue to suffer unnecessarily with major impacts on their future lives and those of their families."

More information about the National Pain Summit and the latest draft of the National Pain Strategy can be found at www.painsummit.org.au.

To speak to Professor Cousins please contact National Pain Summit media manager Clea Hincks on (03) 9093 4917 or 0418 583 276 OR Maggie Lanham on 0412 281 277.



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