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Protecting patients from chronic pain – how anaesthetists can help

Managing patients' pain in the first 72 hours after surgery is critical to reducing their risk of developing chronic pain later, a meeting of anaesthetists will hear this weekend.

Associate Professor David Scott will tell the meeting, "How anaesthetists avoid harm", in Melbourne this Saturday (July 26) that the more severe the post-operative pain, the greater the chance of experiencing chronic pain later on. Chronic pain is pain that persists for more than two months and beyond the time expected for healing following surgery or trauma or other condition.

Associate Professor Scott said one in five Australians suffered chronic pain and up to 50 per cent of people would have some form of chronic pain following certain types of surgery. Up to 10 per cent would have severe chronic pain.

He said the link between poorly managed post-operative pain and the development of chronic pain was only identified in the last 15 years, giving anaesthetists a significant role in reducing the incidence of chronic pain. "We know some patients are at higher risk of post-surgical pain and we know that their pain must be very carefully managed to protect them from later chronic pain," Associate Professor Scott said.

Those at greater risk included patients who were already in pain, patients who had a history of severe post-operative pain and younger patients.

Chronic pain, he said, can be due to over-stimulation of nerves, which then become highly sensitised to responding to pain and don't "switch off" once the injury has healed because the nerves themselves are injured.

"This is why in the first three days – in particular the first 24 hours after an operation – it is so important to effectively manage pain. We are not promising patients will be pain-free after major surgery but patients have a right to feel as comfortable as possible, and severe pain should be avoided - part of our job is to talk with patients and manage their expectations so they have a good idea of what to expect.

"We must emphasise to patients they should seek pain management and not just try to tough it out."

- As part of the drive to raise awareness of chronic pain in the community, and to boost research investment, the Anaesthesia and Pain Medicine Foundation this week released a powerful new campaign highlighting that chronic pain affects people from all walks and life and of all ages. The "Research can make life better" television commercial features a five-year-old boy with juvenile arthritis who lives with daily pain as well as students, office workers and an artist. See the campaign [here](#).

For more information or to request interviews, please contact ANZCA Media Manager Ebru Yaman on +61 408 259 369 or eyaman@anzca.edu.au. Follow us on Twitter [@ANZCA](#).