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Headaches and doctors' burnout on the agenda for pain specialists' meeting

New research into headache treatments and doctors' burnout are among the topical issues to be explored by Australia and New Zealand's leading pain specialty body at its annual pain medicine symposium.

The Faculty of Pain Medicine of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) is meeting in Sydney on Friday 5 May.

Queensland specialist pain medicine physician Dr James O'Callaghan, a pioneer in interventional pain techniques, will present the latest in stimulation treatments for severe headaches and migraines. New treatments include stimulation techniques and non-invasive therapies to help ease headache symptoms.

"Various techniques are now being used to treat severe headaches and while many specialist pain physicians may not need to treat their patients using these it is important to be aware of a range of options," he says.

Australian social psychologist Dr Claire Ashton-James will be discussing research into contributors to pain clinician burnout and the consequences of burnout for patient care.

Myths about the causes of burnout such as workload, stress, and too much empathy will be explored along with strategies to prevent burnout among doctors who specialise in pain medicine.

"Pain specialists are rare and vital to patient outcomes and recovery," she says.

"There is some evidence that pain medicine physicians and anaesthetists are among the most burned out – and hence more likely to leave the profession. We must raise awareness of the risks for burnout, and way to fend it off and help our small but mighty pain specialist workforce to thrive."

The dean of the Faculty of Pain Medicine, Dr Kieran Davis says this year's meeting had brought together delegates from a range of specialties, reflecting the multi-disciplinary membership of the faculty.

Pain medicine is a two-year post-specialty qualification for doctors, including GPs, psychiatrists, rehabilitation specialists, physicians, anaesthetists and surgeons.

"This is an essential forum for specialist pain medicine physicians to explore and debate

how we can combine our knowledge and expertise to improve patient treatment and care,” Dr Davis says.

“The burden of pain in the community is significant with the cost to the Australian economy of nearly \$A140 billion (in 2018). Chronic pain affects about one in five people so it is vital that we not only work with our patients to help them manage their pain but also help educate the community about pain and how it is treated,” Dr Davis says.

Pain medicine specialists serve both as a consultant to other physicians and are often the principal treating physician. The spectrum of care provided by a pain medicine specialist includes co-ordinating rehabilitation services, counselling patients and their families, directing multi-disciplinary teams, liaising with other health care professionals and reviewing and adjusting medication.

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