

Monthly Medical Update

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THIS MONTH'S FOCUS: PAIN MANAGEMENT

Finding the right way to manage pain is no easy matter

By DAVID J. NAGEL, M.D.

WHAT IS PAIN management? I ask this question as a physician who has specialized in pain management for more than 25 years. Deliberating the same question with colleagues at a national meeting, we struggled to find a coherent answer.



DR. NAGEL

While the answer would seem to be clear, it is not. The question is not trivial. Over 100 million Americans suffer from chronic pain of various types at a cost of over \$560 billion annually. In 2011, the Institute of Medicine published a report outlining a

blueprint for transforming attitudes about chronic pain and improving pain management in the United States.

Pain management begins with acceptance, something too often lacking in our culture. Burdened by our pre-conceived notions of what pain is, we refuse to accept the sufferer's experience. Daily, patients tell me, "I never believed anyone in pain until it happened to me." When we refuse to accept someone's suffering, we challenge their self-esteem, isolating them and creating even greater suffering.

While acute pain is a signal, chronic pain is a signal gone awry. Failure to appreciate this difference can have harmful effects in pain management. When we have an acute injury, a pain signal tells us something is wrong and requires attention.

Proper treatment usually allows the signal to be dampened or go away. The opposite happens with chronic pain. Due to a series of complex changes in the nervous system, the signal is maintained or amplified. The symptom has become the disease. Why this happens and how to reverse it are not fully understood.

Most of us can handle almost any pain for a short period of time. The challenge comes when the pain does not go away. Even small pains, when persistent, can create great stress, leading to secondary problems, such as poor sleep, poor appetite, depression, and impaired work function.

The factors affecting the pain patient's experience are complex and unique to each individual. So is the pain management prescription. This challenges the limits of the "10 minute office

visit" and the patience of too many health care providers.

The medical profession often promises something we cannot provide. Patients believe there is a cure. The truth is that a realistic goal in treating chronic pain is minimizing suffering and maximizing function. Treatment is successful if everyone can accept this basic premise.

Successful management of any complex disability requires a comprehensive team approach.

There is hope in the effective treatment of chronic pain. Typically, the best outcomes are realized when the patient understands their options and fully participates, as a partner, with their pain management provider.

Dr. David Nagel has been providing pain management care at Concord Orthopaedics since 1990.

About this section

The New Hampshire Union Leader publishes its Monthly Medical Update on the last Thursday of the month. Each month, the section will focus on a different topic in the health care field. This month's topic is pain management. We plan to provide readers with informative stories about interesting developments in the medical world as health care continues to change and improve at a rapid pace.

Technological advancements are occurring daily, and these pages plan to keep up with the latest developments at New Hampshire health care facilities.

Upcoming topics include heart-healthy lifestyles in January, dental health in February, and Massage Therapy & Holistic Medicine in March.

Local health care organizations and providers are invited to submit their news via email to specials@union-leader.com.