

PROFESSOR HANS KRESS, PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN PAIN FEDERATION (EFIC), UNDERSCORES THE NEED FOR CHRONIC PAIN TO BE RECOGNISED AS A DISEASE IN ITS OWN RIGHT

Pain management

While acute pain may reasonably be understood as a symptom of an underlying disease or injury, in most cases chronic and recurrent pain is a disease in its own right. In many instances, chronic pain can no longer be referred to as a result of a noxious insult, has no biological warning function, and often its end is unforeseeable for the patient as well as for the physician. As a result, chronic pain has severe social and psychological consequences for the suffering individual, and indeed, is notoriously difficult to treat because of its complex, all-encompassing nature.

The challenge

Globally, chronic pain affects more people than heart disease, diabetes and cancer combined. Chronic pain is not only a relevant cause of suffering and reduced quality of life, but it also poses a huge medical, economic and societal burden to developed countries: some 80 million Europeans – or one fifth of the adult population – suffer from chronic pain. Thus, chronic pain is one of industrial civilization's most disabling disorders.

Pain is a major reason for visits to physicians and for taking medication, a major cause of disability and a key factor in quality of life and reduced individual and societal productivity. In 2005, it was estimated that chronic pain resulted in over 500 million illness days in Europe – costing the European economy more than €34bn. What is more, as a major reason for the discontinuation of labour and receiving disability benefit, chronic pain is the number one, or at least the number two, cause for taking early retirement in most European countries.

Unsolved problem

The whole variety of different chronic pain syndromes are not adequately recognised by either policy makers or the public as a real challenge to healthcare providers and to our entire healthcare systems. Chronic pain is an unsolved problem which is having a major impact on modern industrial societies. The diagnosis and management of the many different chronic pain conditions are complex, and this consumes a lot of time and economic resources within healthcare systems. The indirect consequences and costs of inadequately treated chronic pain have also been significantly underestimated – or even neglected – in the past.

Chronic pain also poses a substantial burden on the individual, in that it induces a complex set of physical, psychological, and social changes that have also been underestimated or even neglected by the public and political decision makers alike.

EFIC

The European Pain Federation (EFIC) is a federation of 36 national pain societies across Europe that represent some 20,000 physicians,



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basic scientists, nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists and other healthcare professionals treating or studying pain. A main priority of EFIC is to increase the public awareness of pain as a relevant cause of suffering and reduced quality of life.

In 2001, EFIC published its 'Declaration on Pain' in the European Parliament and called on European national governments and EU institutions to recognise chronic pain as an individual and societal challenge. Ten years later, national and EU policy actions have been very limited: pain has continued to be an under-recognised and, indeed, under-treated, epidemic in most parts of the world, thereby continuing to have a substantial burden on societies and healthcare systems. Currently, healthcare systems do not guarantee general access to adequate pain management.

The EFIC initiative on the 'Societal Impact of Pain' (SIP) is designed to tackle these issues and to provide a forum for presenting facts, defining unmet needs, developing and exchanging new ideas and approaches for their resolution, and bringing the issue of chronic pain to a more general public awareness.

Adequate concepts

Issues such as staff shortages or a lack of awareness on the part of healthcare providers are hindering adequate treatment concepts, in particular when patients are suffering from chronic pain syndromes. It is not all about providing analgesic treatment, because even when analgesia is adequate, many patients suffer from persisting psychosocial and socioeconomic sequelae, which on their own reduce quality of life dramatically.

Finally, both society and the healthcare system have to pay a price for having systematically ignored chronic pain as a disease on its own right, since what is not adequately recognised can also not be handled properly and efficiently.



Roadmap

In 2011, EFIC organised the second symposium on SIP in the European Parliament in Brussels. An important outcome of the 2011 SIP symposium was 'A Roadmap for Action', which outlined key issues of how to address the societal impact of pain at both the national and international levels, which include:

- Acknowledgement of pain as an important factor limiting the quality of life;
- Availability of information and access to pain diagnosis and management;
- Increased awareness of the medical, financial and social impact of pain;
- Increased awareness of the importance of prevention, diagnosis and management of pain;
- Enforcement of pain research;
- Establishment of an EU platform for the exchange, comparison and benchmarking of best practices; and
- Trend monitoring in pain management by using the EU platform.

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European Year Against Pain (EYAP)

Beginning in October 2001 with the first European Week against Pain, each year the European Pain Federation highlights another important pain syndrome. While the EFIC provides scientific and up-to-date educational material for each campaign – including press releases, web-based information and brochures – the 36 members of EFIC organise their own local and national events to increase public awareness on chronic pain, and the respective pain topic in particular.

From 2012 onwards, EFIC continued this awareness campaign and the European Week against Pain has now become the European Year against Pain, working on both the international and national levels.

The European Year against Pain (EYAP) aims not only at healthcare professionals interested and involved in pain medicine, but also at the general public, the media, decision makers and budget holders across Europe.

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