

Finding Better Ways to Help You Get the Information You Need and Want about Chronic Pain


By Judith Hunter

Chronic pain is a frequent and frustrating consequence of spinal cord injury (SCI). It can impact the quality of an individual's daily life and their ability to work and perform their job as usual. It can also impact sleep patterns and their psychological well-being. Opinion surveys of SCI consumers have shown that, with respect to quality of life, elimination of pain is one of their highest priorities. It is important that a person understands their pain so they can learn to manage it to maintain a full and active life. This year a group of Physical Therapy students in the MSc program at the University of Toronto are embarking on a research study. They want to find better ways to help SCI consumers get the information they need and want about chronic pain.

Pain is not a simple sensation. In fact it is defined as an "unpleasant sensory and emotional experience". This definition acknowledges the complex neurophysiology underlying pain. There is a great deal of evidence that each individual's personal experience of pain differs depending on the meaning of the pain both intellectually and emotionally. It is now recognized that education is a key component for managing pain. Despite this, research has shown that people are often hesitant to ask health care practitioners questions about their pain. This leads to a lack of communication and consequently the health care provider is not adequately informed about the consumer's information needs. As a result, these information

needs are not properly addressed and the consumer can be dissatisfied with the knowledge they receive about their chronic pain.

According to the Canadian Pain Society, information and communication is essential to effective pain management. While some individuals with SCI have expressed great interest in learning about chronic pain, there is little research addressing the content and delivery methods for this information. In fact most surveys that assessed the information needs among individuals with SCI did not even ask about pain. As a result little is known about consumer's perspectives on the content and mode of delivery for useful information about SCI-related chronic pain.

The Physical Therapy students will be conducting in-depth interviews of volunteers with SCI-related chronic pain. The purpose of the interview is to explore the questions that SCI consumers have regarding their chronic pain. The students also want to learn about the individual's preferred methods of getting answers to their pain questions. As your CPA Ontario post-doctoral fellow specializing in pain research, I will be supervising this group of students. I am excited about this project as it will give consumers an opportunity to express their questions and needs regarding their chronic pain and to contribute to an area of research where little is known. Please watch for more information about this project very soon. If you have any comments or questions please contact Judi Hunter at judith.hunter@utoronto.ca. 

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