



Pain management

Chronic pain affects many people worldwide, and is a direct or indirect feature of numerous long-term diseases. However, despite affecting a huge and diverse patient population over many disease areas, the enormity of the challenges faced by patients living with chronic pain is often under-appreciated globally. It is for this reason that pain should be regarded as a global health priority, and recognised as a shared problem amongst all patient communities.

Introduction

IAPO's [Declaration on patient-centred healthcare](#) states that "patients', families' and carers' priorities are different in every country and in every disease area, but from this diversity we have some common priorities".

Chronic pain is a problem that is shared amongst multiple patient communities and individuals, irrespective of their social backgrounds or disease areas. Given the uncertain boundaries of this problem and the difficulty of identifying effective treatments, IAPO calls on healthcare stakeholders to listen to, and engage with patient populations affected by chronic pain.

[The International Association for the Study of Pain \(IASP\)](#) describes pain as "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage". One important aspect that is emphasised by IASP's approach, and one also noted by the [US Institute of Medicine \(IOM\)](#), is that pain is an entirely "subjective experience" that is unique to an individual. Pain is not visible, nor can it be felt or heard, and people living with pain may find it difficult to communicate a precise account of the pain they are experiencing.

The discrepancy between experience, and ability to fully communicate this experience, becomes profoundly important when considering patients living with chronic pain. This therefore draws attention to the need for:

- Establishment of meaningful channels of communication between patients affected by pain and key healthcare stakeholders;
- identification of appropriate tools by which patients with pain can convey an adequate understanding of their experience;
- Effective involvement of patients affected by pain in the identification and development of effective treatment options and strategies.

Pain is generally divided, by duration, into acute and chronic pain. Acute pain "is provoked by a specific disease or injury" and is "self-limited" ([Grihnik and Ferrante, 1991](#)). Chronic pain, on the other hand, "lasts more than several months" and can be extremely difficult to treat ([IOM, 2011](#)).

Policy and resources

In June 2007, the **World Health Organization (WHO)** released the "[WHO Normative Guidelines on Pain Management](#)". With the aim of establishing effective and acceptable pain management guidelines, this Delphi study delivered a set of recommendations. The Delphi technique is a method aimed at eliciting perspectives from experts in a given domain.

In the WHO study, special importance was placed on the necessity of working collaboratively with key organizations. This acts to strengthen the guidelines' practical applicability, as well as developing distinct guidelines for acute pain, chronic malignant pain, and chronic non-malignant pain. Furthermore, in the resolution [WHA67.19](#), the World Health Assembly urged WHO's member states to "improve access to pain management medicines", in line with the United Nations' international drug control conventions.

With regard to the **African region**, in 2010 the African Palliative Care Association (APCA), with the support of the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), developed "[Beating Pain. A Pocket Guide for Pain Management in Africa](#)". The guide provides a description of the different types of pain, as well as tips to effectively deal with it. More recently, in 2016, [the Kampala Declaration](#) was released at the 5th International African Palliative Care Conference. In the declaration, the African Ministers of Health reaffirmed their commitment to adopt the recommendations of the WHA's resolution [WHA67.19](#) outlined above.

In the **North American region**, the American Pain Society (APS) provides a series of "evidence-based clinical practice [guidelines](#) on the management of complex pain problems". Although the guidelines are mostly intended for providers, they represent a valuable educational tool for all stakeholders who have an interest in pain management issues.

Advocacy and practice

Raising the public's awareness over a highly subjective experience, such as pain, can pose various challenges, most of which relate to communicating and sharing experiences.

- **How to make others properly understand something they cannot see or feel?** In this context, "others" refers to not only friends and family, but also healthcare stakeholders and

decision-makers. Communicating an understanding of the problems experienced by chronic pain to the general public has the potential to reduce stigma by those unfamiliar with chronic pain.

- **How to combat (self-)stigmatisation?** People living with chronic pain might develop self-stigmatisation, often worrying that they are exaggerating their pain or that those around them are blaming them. This is a vital consideration, since patients affected by internalised stigma are less likely to engage in the management of their own healthcare ([Waugh et al., 2014](#)). Being aware of the self-stigmatising effect is a crucial first step on the road to combating it.
- **What does it mean to live with pain?** Pain is not only an indicator of underlying disease, but a problem in its own right. A valid communication process is essential to facilitate patients' involvement in the identification of effective treatment strategies. Equally important, though, is a sharing of experiences with other people living with pain. This is underlined by the [American Chronic Pain Associations \(ACPAs\) web site](#), which shows that social and emotional support from others dealing with the same problem is indispensable in the successful management of long-term pain. The site provides useful information to providers and people living with pain.

How to move forward

This September, IAPO will support the International Pain Awareness Month promoted by ACPA. This will represent an opportunity for patient advocates and organizations to raise awareness of issues concerning pain and pain management. By actively supporting the International Pain Awareness Month, IAPO aims to bring together key actors such as [Partners for Understanding Pain](#) and [the International Pain management Network](#), in order to work together, develop strong policy positions and carry out effective advocacy activities around crucial issues. These include:

- Ensuring a balanced approach in helping individuals manage pain, so they can live fuller, more active lives;
- Building alliances and setting strategies to increase the understanding of the issues faced by those living with pain.

Join us in marking September as International Pain Awareness Month.