Pain Medicine

Repairing a Fractured Dream

In 2000, John D. Loeser (Seattle, Washington) wrote the following:

Will pain specialists disappear? This is not a trivial question when one is addressing members of a pain association. However, from the perspective of a nation’s health care delivery system, the advent or demise of pain specialists is not likely to be noticed. This is especially true in the United States, where most physicians who specialize in pain are anesthesiologists, who will just retreat to the operating room if pain medicine disappears.1

More recently, in an editorial accompanying one of many epidemiologic studies that are revealing how dismal the real outcomes of chronic pain treatments are, particularly opioid-based treatments,2–7 Katz wrote the following:

Referral to pain clinics is particularly helpful when patients have pain that could be alleviated by a nerve block. These patients are, however, the minority. Sending patients to a pain specialist to help with outpatient opioid medication can ease the burden of the primary care physician, and many clinics have interdisciplinary staff to help manage underlying mental health and substance use problems. However, such referrals undermine the relationship between patients and their primary care physicians and suggest that the pain, which is very much a global problem, is in some way separable from physical and mental health. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, pain clinics might not be an option for uninsured low income patients.8

Are We Losing Ground?

Not long ago, pain management consisted of opioids combined with compassionate care, applied successfully and almost exclusively to the treatment of acute and cancer pain. There were no sophisticated pain interventions; pain was not a disease, a specialty, a journal, or a clinic. Pain research and pain clinics burgeoned in the second half of the twentieth century.9 Chronic pain became not a common burden of patients treated for a long time who become refractory to treatment.10

The state of long-term opioid treatment should be considered first. We see a picture of increasing use despite lack of evidence for effectiveness.16 When it is not working, we have been taught to increase the dose until it is, although experience suggests that if it is not working, it is not going to work. Worse still, high doses are associated with toxicity and the refactoriness that may eventually make it impossible to treat pain effectively.17 We are providing a treatment that for many patients is not improving their pain but is compromising their lives and futures. However, even this ignores the bigger societal problem of rampant prescription opioid abuse that affects all strata of society, from teenagers popping “oxys” to the poor and disadvantaged, who see duping their physicians into prescribing opioids as a way to pay for their groceries. Both abuse and death rates associated with prescription opioids have increased alarmingly and in direct correlation with increased prescribing for chronic pain.18,19

That is not to say that there are not some patients whose lives can be improved by opioid treatment; it is to say that current indiscriminate prescribing must be reexamined. Who taught us to do all this? In large part, it has been the drug companies that have for years picked the message and the messengers while sponsoring much of the postgraduate education and all the major pain meetings.20,21

Henry Beecher, M.D., Patrick Wall, D.M., F.R.S., and Ronald Melzack, O.C., O.Q., F.R.C.S., were pioneers of the concept that pain does not simply occur along a line-labeled “intensity,” thereby making the pain, which affects all strata of society, more suffering now than I ever saw when all physicians did was aggressively treat pain at its worst and most distressing. In the case of chronic pain, we fail patients because we promise more than we can give.5,11,12 For many patients with severe pain at the end of life or related to trauma and surgery, we have lost our greatest weapon (i.e., opioids), at least for patients treated for a long time who become refractory to treatment.13–15

Quantitative study of the psychologic effects of drugs is an urgent need; such work is properly a part of pharmacology. The possibility of accurate quantitative work in this field has been demonstrated; but even so, accomplishments to date constitute no more than a beginning in what promises to be a great development in pharmacology.22

Beecher recognized, as long ago as the 1940s, that drugs can have different effects in the same patient in different circumstances. The context in which opioids are given, for example,
Attention to the behavioral aspects of pain may even, in some patients, obviate the need for drugs; at the same time, drugs may become ineffective when the powerful placebo is lost.25 Another great pioneer of our field, John Bonica, M.D., whom many consider the founder of modern pain medicine, also recognized that drugs and injections alone do not work for chronic pain; they must be combined with physical and particularly behavioral approaches. So what happened to the multidisciplinary model that Bonica espoused and all of Beecher’s work suggested? It became unsupportable because of a failure to recognize that the less glamorous and more

can markedly alter tolerance to their effects.23,24

### Table 1. Pain Society Memberships by Specialty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialty</th>
<th>Major Pain Societies for US Physicians</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IASP*</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Clinical</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anesthesiology</td>
<td>2,333 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology/behavioral sciences</td>
<td>611 (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical medicine and rehabilitation</td>
<td>284 (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nursing (includes nurse practitioners, physician assistants, registered nurses, and midwives)</td>
<td>337 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine (includes internal medicine, primary care, family practice, rheumatology, pediatrics, dermatology, cardiology, emergency medicine, geriatric medicine, gastroenterology, hematology, occupational medicine, osteopathic medicine, and sports medicine)</td>
<td>467 (6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neurology</td>
<td>278 (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surgery (includes neurosurgery, orthopedics, general surgery, obstetrics and gynecology, ophthalmology, otolaryngology, plastic surgery, podiatry, trauma surgery, urology)</td>
<td>246 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentistry/oral medicine</td>
<td>227 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacology (includes pharmacy and clinical pharmacology)</td>
<td>173 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatry (includes psychosomatic medicine)</td>
<td>104 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oncology</td>
<td>40 (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other alternative types (includes acupuncture and chiropractic)</td>
<td>81 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other clinical types (includes physical therapy, radiology, respiratory therapy, clinical neurophysiology, orthopedic medicine, palliative medicine, occupational therapy, nuclear medicine, and surgical technician)</td>
<td>549 (7)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Research</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroscience (includes neurobiology, neuropharmacology, neurophysiology, and neuropsychiatry)</td>
<td>1,175 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other nonclinical types (includes anthropology, healthcare administration, law, media, philosophy, public health, publishing, medical technology, medical writing, pathology, social sciences, and veterinary medicine)</td>
<td>136 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other research (includes clinical research, epidemiology, pathology, research and development, and statistics)</td>
<td>246 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others</strong> (pain medicine and undeclared)</td>
<td>340 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>7,627</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Data are given as number (percentage) of each group.

* The IASP has international members (76%) and US members (24%). Data are per IASP membership statistics from September 22, 2010.
† Data are per APS statistics from the APS Web site (accessed September 25, 2010). ‡ Data are per AAPM statistics provided by the Executive Office (September 23, 2010).

AAPM = American Academy of Pain Medicine; APS = American Pain Society; IASP = International Association for the Study of Pain; NA = not applicable.
ponderous aspects of clinical care are actually worth paying for because they work, even if not with dramatic immediate effects. The value of the model is still recognized, as suggested by this segment from the American Society of Anesthesiologists Web site:

Frequently the anesthesiologist heads a team of other specialists and doctors who work together to help you manage your pain. The anesthesiologist or other pain medicine doctors (such as neurologists, oncologists, orthopedists, physiatrists, and psychiatrists) and nonphysician specialists (such as nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, physical or rehabilitation therapists and psychologists) all work together to evaluate your condition. Then this ‘team’ of specialists will develop a treatment plan designed just for you.

In reality, how often does such an ideal setup exist? How many multidisciplinary pain centers have had to be closed, and how many academic pain programs have had to focus on interventional approaches to the near exclusion of all else to meet the production metrics expected by their hospitals and bean counters? The model for economic survival is not the model for good care. In many senses, we are trapped: because they are instantly satisfying and heavily reimbursed, paid for thoughtful interactions, overusing procedures because industry supports our educational and research efforts. And how many academic pain programs have had to focus on interventionals alone will never be enough. As for patients taking opioids, we cannot simply refuse to prescribe or shuttle these patients through high-production clinics. We were at best complacent and at worst active in creating the opioid problem that we see today; it is up to us to help turn it around. Our clinics should help the clinicians in primary care (the primary prescribers) select the right patients for long-term opioid therapy and should be able to offer exactly the type of ideal care outlined by the American Society of Anesthesiologists itself to those (hopefully few) patients who need opioids and specialty care. We must perform the outcomes research coupled with the basic science that will allow us to identify who is helped and by what means and which patients will be better off with nonmedical approaches. I would like to be able to hold my head high and say that what I am doing, and what my specialty is doing, is helping to relieve the burden of chronic pain. And what better time than now to take stock and begin to turn things around, when it is becoming increasingly clear that if we do not lead the pain field in the right direction, others will do it for us.

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References

5. Volinn E, Fargo JD, Fine PG: Opioid therapy for nonspecific
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