

## Nurses' Role in Managing and Treating Pain

Chronic pain affects some 70 million Americans yet it is one of the most overlooked medical conditions. Pain affects more Americans than diabetes, heart disease and cancer combined, and is a leading cause of disability, according to the American Pain Foundation. Although it is one of the most common reasons patients seek health care, it is often inadequately assessed and treated.

Most hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare facilities are now required to assess and treat pain. However, nurses and other health team members often do not have the preparation or tools to effectively assess and manage pain. This lack of effective pain treatment may drive patients to seek more aggressive care to obtain relief, which can result in unnecessary surgeries, injections or procedures. Unrelieved pain also triggers more hospital admissions, longer hospital stays and unnecessary trips to the emergency room, all of which increase health care costs.

Poor pain management is not just a problem facing adults. Some 20 percent of children experience chronic pain and millions more do not receive effective pain relief. A lack of appropriate treatment puts these children at risk of developing a pain condition that could last a lifetime and make them distrust the medical system.

Nurses are spearheading efforts to find solutions to facilitate better pain management, both in adults and children. A number of projects under the auspices of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Interdisciplinary Nursing Quality Research Initiative (INQRI) are looking at interventions to help nurses assess and manage pain among patients, finding ways to measure attitudes toward pain treatment and helping patients better manage their own pain.

**Improving Nurse Response to Pain.** Researchers at the University of Utah<sup>1</sup> and Columbus Children's Hospital<sup>2</sup> in Ohio are examining patients' attitudes toward pain treatment. The Utah team has developed and tested a questionnaire to measure adult patients' opinions about how nurses manage pain associated with cancer. The Ohio team is examining how hospitalized children perceive their care, including how well their pain is treated. They are developing age-appropriate patient satisfaction scales for hospitalized children that include a focus on pain management. The information will be used to improve care in hospitals but also to help patients select providers that can best address pain.

**Helping Patients Manage Pain.** Researchers at the University of California, Davis<sup>3</sup> are evaluating the effects of a nurse-led intervention designed to promote successful self-management of pain for spinal surgery patients. Evidence that nurse-guided counseling interventions improve patient outcomes and control costs will likely lead to improvements in pain management by nurses across the country.

**Improving Palliative Care.** There are few studies showing the linkage between quality palliative care in the intensive care unit and better patient and family outcomes. There is also little known on how to measure and improve pain outcomes in this setting. Researchers at the Oregon Health & Science University<sup>4</sup> and Kaiser Permanente Northwest are attempting to address both gaps by examining nursing's contribution to the relief of pain. This team is working to develop an accurate, useful and feasible measure of effective palliative care that will guide quality improvement efforts.

**Fostering Lines of Communication.** Nurses are essential to helping patients communicate when they are critically ill. Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh<sup>5</sup> hope to open lines of communication between seriously ill patients who are unable to communicate and their nurses and other health care providers by testing a web-based nurse communication training and materials program (SPEACS-2). They will be looking at the effect of this innovation on a variety of patient outcomes, including pain management. The team believes the intervention has the potential to improve nursing care quality by relieving patients' frustration when their illness makes it difficult to speak and more accurately interpreting their messages about pain and other symptoms and needs.

1. Beck, Susan, "Measuring Nursing Care Quality Related to Pain Management." Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ID#58299. 9/1/06-8/31/08.
2. Ryan-Wenger, Nancy, "Quality of Pediatric Nursing Care from the Children's Perspective." Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ID#62575. 9/1/07-8/31/09.
3. Ward, Deborah and Wanlass, Richard, "Nursing Intervention to Facilitate Patient Activation for Improved Pain Self Management." Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ID#66629. 9/1/09-8/31/11.
4. Hansen, Lissi and Mularski, Richard, "Nursing's Specific Contributions to Quality Palliative Care within the Context of Interdisciplinary Intensive Care Practice." Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ID#66630. 9/1/09-8/31/11.
5. Happ, Mary and Barnato, Amber, "SPEACS 2: Improving Patient Communication and Quality Outcomes in the ICU." Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ID#66633. 9/1/09-8/31/11.