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Chronic Pain a Problem for One in Four Massachusetts Adults

Minorities and the Poor Especially Affected by Pain

BOSTON – One in four Massachusetts adults between the ages of 18 and 70+ has experienced serious chronic pain and one in three of those have ended up in the emergency room, according to a poll commissioned by the Massachusetts Pain Initiative.

The survey revealed the significant impact undertreated pain has on quality of life and productivity, and highlighted the difficulty Massachusetts residents have in finding effective care for their pain.

The survey also showed the significant disparities in serious chronic pain and pain care experienced by Massachusetts' minorities and the poor. They report higher levels of pain, are less likely to have their pain diagnosed, have more difficulty obtaining adequate care, and are more pessimistic about finding relief for their pain.

The random telephone poll of 600 Massachusetts residents was conducted from the 3rd to the 12th of February by Fisher College. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent.

“These numbers show that undertreated pain is a serious problem in Massachusetts, especially among minorities and the poor,” said Massachusetts Pain Initiative leader Carol Curtiss, MSN, RN-BC. “Failing to treat pain ruins lives and has a significant socioeconomic impact. Massachusetts residents deserve appropriate and effective pain care.”

Twenty-four percent of the poll's respondents reported having chronic pain – defined as persistent pain lasting at least three months over the past two years. Among those pain sufferers, nearly half (48 percent) put the severity at 7 or higher on a 0-10 scale – representing severe pain -- and 30 percent ended up in the emergency room – the most costly form of treatment.

Pain negatively affects quality of life for chronic pain sufferers surveyed. For example, almost 8 in 10 (79 percent) experienced difficulty sleeping, almost three-quarters (73 percent) felt anxious, irritable, or depressed, and almost 7 in 10 (69 percent) had pain interfere with everyday activities. In addition, almost three-quarters (73 percent) of serious chronic pain sufferers reported that their pain interfered with their ability to work productively, at least some of the time.

For minorities and the poor, dealing with pain is especially challenging. For example, minorities reported experiencing pain nearly twice as often (42 percent compared to 24 percent for the general market) and their pain is more severe (43 percent of minorities rated their pain as 8 or higher on a 0-10 scale compared to 28 percent for non-minorities). Further, minorities failed to have their pain diagnosed by their primary care physician at more than twice the rate of non-minorities – 28 percent compared to 11 percent. Minorities also ended up in the emergency room at a much higher percentage than non-minorities – 47 percent to 29 percent.

Minorities were significantly more likely to rely on their primary care provider (76 percent compared to 58 percent for non-minorities) and less likely to rely primarily on a medical or pain specialist or other specialized practitioner for the treatment of their pain (17 percent versus 39 percent). The significant undertreated pain experienced by minorities left them more pessimistic that anything could be done to relieve their pain (40 percent compared to 26 percent for non-minorities).

“It is striking that despite the progress in medicine’s understanding of pain and how to effectively treat it, that so many people continue to suffer needlessly,” said Paul Arnstein, PhD, RN, FNP-C, ACNS-BC, Massachusetts General Hospital Clinical Nurse Specialist for Pain Relief. “People should not live or die with uncontrolled pain because of unrealistic fears or mistaken beliefs about available treatments.”

Economic factors were important in many of the responses, and the minority/non-minority data closely mirrored the lower income/higher income responses. For example, about one in three people (32 percent making less than \$25,000, 34 percent making between \$25,000 and \$75,000, and 33 percent of minorities) indicated they did not obtain pain treatment they needed because they could not afford it versus just 13 percent for those making over \$75,000 and 16 percent for non-minorities. Nearly one in three people (28 percent) with an annual salary of less than \$25,000 (27 percent for minorities) said they had just “given up” on trying to find relief – compared to just 14 percent of those making over \$75,000 (19 percent for non-minorities).

Eleven percent of those earning less than \$25,000 (16% for minorities) had been without health insurance during the past 5 years versus only five percent earning more than \$75,000 (6 percent for non-minorities) and this disproportionately affected how often minorities report they went to the doctor. Finally, only 91 percent of minorities report currently having health insurance versus 98 percent for non-minorities.

The survey also found that:

- The elderly and women felt that their pain was taken less seriously -- 26 percent and 23 percent, respectively, compared to 15 percent for non-elderly and men.
- Forty-two percent of people earning less than \$25,000 a year reported not complaining about their pain because they didn’t want to bother their health care provider – compared to just 28 percent among those making more than \$75,000.
- Almost 3 times as many women as men “agreed strongly” that they were more likely to not want to complain too much about their pain since they did not want to bother their health care provider (11 percent for women versus only 4 percent for men).

The Massachusetts Pain Initiative is a state-wide, non-profit, volunteer organization dedicated to ending needless suffering from persistent and acute pain and to improving quality of life for all people affected by pain. MassPI volunteers are health care professionals, including doctors, nurses, social workers, and other health care providers, community members, persons with pain, caregivers, and anyone who is interested in reducing suffering from pain. MassPI focuses on increasing knowledge and understanding of pain and pain management through Professional Education of healthcare providers, raising Public Awareness about pain, and improving the regulatory and legislative environments related to pain management. MassPI is a member of the Alliance of State Pain Initiatives (ASPI).

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