

Mindfulness, not just meds for pain sufferers, experts urge

It's time to teach patients living with chronic pain to 'rewire' their brains, panelists say



Some Ottawa doctors say chronic pain should be managed more with mindfulness, and less with powerful painkillers such as opioids. (Toby Talbot/Associated Press)

Patients living with chronic pain need more than medication; they need to learn how to "rewire" their brains to deal with their condition, according to two experts speaking at an international health-care conference in Ottawa Wednesday.

The conference, called Humanizing Healthcare, is organized by Bruyère Continuing Care.

Dr. Anne Hennessy, a consulting psychiatrist specializing in geriatric care at

the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre, is one of the panelists exploring alternatives to medication for people living with pain.

She said constant physical pain can be debilitating.

"You get more anxious and distressed, and that can feed itself and sets the mind on fire. Emotionally, it can be very challenging to manage," Hennessy said.

1 in 5 living with pain, experts say

Health-care professionals estimate 20 per cent of Canadians are living with some form of chronic pain. Fear, trouble sleeping and a feeling of being "out of control" are the hallmarks of the condition, Hennessy said.

But doctors too often turn to the prescription pad to treat patients, she said.

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Treating chronic pain with opioids can lead to addiction, Hennessy said. She's advocating for another approach.

"Live beside the pain, and not in it," she advised pain sufferers. "We need to teach mindfulness as a stress reduction, because the brain has elasticity and we have to try and train your brain to pay attention to other aspects of your

life."

No quick fix

Dong Giao Tran, an Ottawa acupuncturist at the Ottawa Integrative Cancer Centre, believes it's impossible to separate chronic physical pain from emotional stress. He treats cancer patients, and said they are reminded of their disease every time they feel pain, no matter how severe.

"We are always trying to find the quick fix and we need to empower patients that no one certain thing can be done to help them," said Giao Tran. "The pain may be here but you don't have to feel miserable."

He agrees with Hennessy that mindfulness training should be part of the treatment program for chronic pain sufferers, but said it takes time to retrain the brain, and noted tight health budgets make prolonged treatment difficult.