REVIEWS IN PAIN

A BPS publication

VOL. 3 – NO. 1 – JUNE 2009

THE BRITISH PAIN SOCIETY

CHRONIC PAIN AND ICEBERGS

EDITORIAL

The emphasis of this edition of Reviews in Pain moves right out of the clinic towards the wider implications of the burden of chronic pain. Phillips presents a health economists view of the problem to demonstrate the phenomenal cost of chronic pain to the public purse. The health care costs are extremely high but these are dwarfed by the social, production and other economic costs.

Phillips gives the example of the data from Maniadakis and Gray (1998) and interestingly the same team performed an analysis on Heart disease data for 1999¹. The health care cost of heart disease was £1.73 billion, greater than the £1.63b spent on back pain in the previous year. However the total cost of heart disease was £7.06b compared with nearly in excess of £12b for low back pain. Now, I am not an economist but that looks like a reason for developing a National Service Framework for chronic pain to me. Healthcare is just the tip of the iceberg.

The benefits cost may be even greater than the official figures suggest. A recent review of 1000 new registrants to Incapacity benefits asked the claimants to state the main reason why they were not working irrespective of the reason on their certificate. Musculoskeletal pain was cited by 40% as the main reason and mental health by 25%, six months later this was 47% and 22% respectively².

Buck goes on to develop this theme to demonstrate that we need not pay so high a price for chronic pain if the condition can be managed both in the public and occupational health arenas more effectively. However, there is little evidence that collaborative approaches between healthcare, employers and public health to the management of pain are happening in the UK. This is to our cost – literally.

In a third paper Jones reviews the current state of physiotherapy education and how this might be improved. Despite there being innovative approaches to improve pain education, all of us, I fear, risk not seeing the bigger picture. We remain in the hold pumping out the water after hitting the iceberg. Pain is a public health issue and needs an approach which tackles it in its entirety. Evidence-based government policy? Well that would be a start.

Paul Watson,

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1. Liu JLY, Maniadakis N, Gray A, Rayner M. The economic burden of coronary heart disease in the UK. *Heart* 2002;88:597-603
2. Kemp PA, Davidson J. Routes onto Incapacity Benefit: Findings from a follow up survey of recent claimants. Department of Work and Pensions Research Report No. 516 p16 2008

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