

Challenges to Effective Pain Management: An Overview

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Abstract: In this article, my humble effort is to highlight the upcoming challenges in the field of effective pain management with utmost precision and care. Inadequately treated pain is a serious public health problem both in the developed and in developing countries. Although there is a tremendous change in knowledge and resources for pain management, ineffective pain management continues to pose a significant challenge to patient care. Nevertheless, Pain management become ineffective due to certain barriers related to the patient, health care professionals, health care system and in every field of medication

Keywords: Barriers, Pain management, Effective, Patient.

INTRODUCTION

Humans have always known the pain and continue to seek relief from it. The impact of pain in society is great and pain is the primary reason any patient seeks medical care. Not all health providers receive adequate training in this area and new information is not widely disseminated and understood. Pain management is enhanced only when a multidisciplinary approach is applied. Pain is so subjective that many clinicians define pain as whatever the patient describes it to be.

The aim of medicine is to preserve and restore health as well as to relieve suffering. Understanding pain is essential for achieving both these goals. Pain is universally understood as the most common condition that brings a patient to seek medical attention [1].

Various assessment tools are employed to evaluate pain. They are also used to evaluate the response to treatment. However, effective pain management does have certain barriers. Here we look into the barriers and ways to overcome them so as to ensure effective pain management.

Patient related barriers

Patients don't want to give trouble to the doctors because they want to be a good patient. Some may feel pain as inevitable part of their disease or doesn't want to recognize that their disease is progressing, hence they may not complain about their pain [2].

All patients are not treated in the same manner. Disparities are seen between racial and ethnic lines, and between men and women. Racial and ethnic minorities are particularly at high risk of inadequate pain relief [3]. It is observed that some individuals tend to tolerate more pain when compared to others and thus have higher pain reaction threshold. Increase in the intensity of pain could indicate worsening of the disease condition.

Most patients fail to communicate effectively to the physician regarding their pain. Patients are at times apprehensive if they would become addicted to medications when taken for a prolonged period of time. There may also be concerns about the side effects of medications [4, 5]. The patient should be told to notify the physician promptly in case of any side effects, so as to manage the condition effectively. They may also fear about becoming tolerant to certain medications. Some medications do not have a ceiling effect and then the dosage can be increased safely until infinity. Thus a patient suffering from chronic or intractable pain is required to be working with a well-versed pain specialist who will closely assess the patient's condition. Ineffective communication is one of the significant patient-related barriers[6]. Ineffective pain assessment could be due to various factors which include dementia, patients with learning difficulties, children who are unable to speak, patients in critical care units, intubated patients etc[7].

Strategies to overcome patient related barriers

The patients and their caregivers should be educated on the proper use and storage of medications. Awareness of the different types of pain and strategies

to overcome them is essential. Pain management strategies include both pharmacological as well as non-pharmacological interventions. Non-pharmacological strategies in pain management include distraction, massage, positioning, cold or heat compressors etc while the pharmacological options for pain management include analgesic medications [8].

Health care professionals related barriers

Knowledge gap, negative attitudes toward prescribing opioids, inadequate assessment skills and negligence in prescribing are the barriers that clinicians can unwittingly commit during their clinical encounters with patients [9]. Moreover anxiety about the regulation of controlled substances, concerns about the side effect of analgesics as well as fear of becoming addicted or tolerant to analgesics are factors contributing to ineffective pain management. Therefore there is an indication for improved training in pain management at all levels of professional education [10].

The effective management of pain should be left to able-hands who specialize in this field. Assessment of pain should be done using standardized and validated tools. Assessment of chronic or intractable pain should be done by a specialist. The use of drugs in pain control aims to keep the patient free from pain. The main principles of choosing analgesics to achieve efficacy are based on the WHO (World health organization) analgesic ladder [11]. Apart from the primary health condition, apprehension regarding the side effects of medications leads to non-adherence. The staged approach to the prescribing analgesia allows the flexibility for different intensities of pain.

Dosing of analgesic drugs is based upon the body weight of the patient. Long-acting opioids reduce the dosing frequency. The oral route is often optimal and preferred route. It is convenient, flexible and produces steady blood concentration of the drug consumed. Co-operation among all healthcare providers is necessary to achieve effective pain management.

Strategies to overcome health care professional's barriers

Improving the quality of pain management services should reduce many of the complexities involved in pain care. There is a need for an increase in the number of efficient health professionals with advanced expertise in pain care. Clinicians usually have a little skill and training with pain medications particularly opioids so that improving the knowledge of pharmacology especially dosages, side effect and duration of action is needed. Regular review of patient satisfaction data can be used as a quick measure of pain care quality.

Health care system related barriers

Within the healthcare system, there are a variety of tools for the assessment of pain. It is also important to be up to date with current evidence and to use validated assessment tools to optimize the pain assessment and its management.

The organization within which pain management takes place often imposes a number of restrictions which may hinder the effective management of pain. These can relate to accountability for pain management, hospital policies regarding drug administration and availability of resources. The hospital national policies can also influence the availability of analgesics. Other healthcare system-related barriers include:

- Lack of access to policies and clinical practice guidelines for pain management
- High staff turnover rates
- Inadequate education training and staffing
- Poor communication between doctors and nurses cause a delay in pain treatment
- Inadequate and ineffective communication with palliative care team [12]

The financial status of the patient may also hinder the pain management services. In some cases, the most appropriate treatment might not be reimbursed by insurance companies or may be considered too costly to approve. In these cases, the patient might get substandard or older treatments that may not even be effective. Another problem is the restrictive regulations for controlled substances. Many medications when first approved were used for a specific purpose as the time progress specific medications are found to be effective in other problems and therefore are not recognized by the health care system for these alternative uses. Also, the high cost of new medications that do not have a generic equivalent are kept out of insurance agencies formularies, this makes a physician choose a less appropriate or older alternate or no alternative at all.

Strategies to overcome health care system related barriers

Consistent assessment and documentation of pain using an individualized approach is recommended by a number of organizations. Clinicians should be familiar with a variety of pain assessment tools and understand the necessity for the regular assessment of pain based on the needs of the patient. Pain management policies have been developed by a number of regulatory agencies, which provide voluntary and mandatory guidelines about pain management in healthcare organizations. A balanced approach to pain and its management is a key concept for healthcare organizations and clinicians.

A hospital should have a multidisciplinary policy and procedures for assessment of pain, prescribing or ordering analgesics, and pain management algorithms. There should be an auditing system to measure the effectiveness of pain management by healthcare professionals [13].

CONCLUSION

Every individual seeks relief from pain. Drugs for pain management play an important role in the reduction of pain but various other factors influence effective pain management. Adequate pain relief is a reasonable and reachable goal for every patient once barriers in achieving this goal are recognized, addressed and overcome. Individual health providers, in cooperation with the informed patient, have to apply current knowledge regarding pain management to their daily practices to overcome these barriers. Despite the growing evidence-based clinical guidelines, pain is still inadequately treated. This can be attributed to lack of knowledge among health professionals and lack of guidelines. Education of patient and healthcare professionals and adherence to clinical guidelines are of paramount importance for effective pain management.

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