The Fifth Vital Sign": Pain Basics for the Emerging Clinician

Introduction

Pain relief trends to remain a low priority in many clinical settings for physicians and nurses. This is true despite that fact that pain is prevalent, pain is the primary symptom that brings most patients into a healthcare setting, and pain is a universal experience. Pain is also a frequent and direct consequence of healthcare treatments. The most vulnerable populations, including minorities and children, often experience the poorest pain management.

In this unit we explore the ways in which our understanding of pain influences its management. As a matter of understanding between doctors and patients, pain becomes an ethical and humanitarian issue and therefore part of the professionalism and compassion of the physician.

Objectives

At the end of this unit you should be able to:
1. Identify and discuss ethical, professional, and humanitarian issues involved in adequate pain management.
2. Explain the basic principles of pain management
3. Describe how different types of pain require differing awareness and response on the part of physicians.

Competencies

Medical knowledge
Social context of health care
Professionalism

Preparation

1. Read the articles listed as resources for this unit.
2. Familiarize yourself with the different kinds of pain listed in Basic Mechanisms Underlying the Causes and Effects of Pain – as part of class Dr. Hallarman will ask you to link these definitions to a series of cases.

Process

Class today begins in lecture. Lynn Hallarman, director of the palliative care service at Stony Brook will review basic principles of pain management and barriers to adequate pain management. Following this presentation we will adjourn to section and discuss Dr. Hallarman’s lecture and the short cases which will be given out in lecture today.

Study Questions

1. List different types of pain and describe their etiology and significance.
2. What obligations (professional and ethical) do patient descriptions of pain place on physicians.
3. What is your position as an ethical professional regarding the current state of pain management in the medical community? Please utilize the Attributes of Professionalism as a basis for your discussion.

**Articles on File**

- Editorial: Barriers to Effective Cancer Pain Management: A Review of the Literature
- Basic Mechanisms Underlying the Causes and Effects of Pain, Chapter two in: Pain: Clinical Manual, Chris Passero, Judith A. Paice, and Margo McCaffery
- Eric Cassell, The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine

**Resource Links**