



Communicating About Cancer Pain: Fixing the Doctor-Patient Disconnect

Nearly 1.5 million new cancer cases are expected to be diagnosed in 2009, and more than 560,000 cancer deaths are anticipated.¹ Many of these patients will experience cancer-related pain – either from the disease or its treatment. While cancer-related pain is particularly prevalent for those with advanced disease, pain also can be a problem among survivors, with chronic pain lingering long after disease-directed treatment concludes.

Fortunately, many effective pain medicines and non-drug therapies are available to bring relief so patients can complete scheduled cancer treatments, continue to work, and enjoy the company of family and friends. But significant pain assessment and management deficiencies are consistently reported in the clinical settings where cancer patients are seen.

To better understand pain's impact on the lives of patients, the American Cancer Society launched a pain education project through its national cancer information call center (1-800-ACS-2345 available 24-hours day/7 days a week). We learned from 360 patients, survivors and caregivers calling our cancer hotline from 38 states between November 2008 and January 2009 that:

- 65% were experiencing cancer-related pain at the time of their call, with two-thirds rating their pain intensity as moderate or severe.
- 76% said they told their healthcare team about their pain, but *two-thirds of those callers still rated their pain intensity as moderate or severe.*
- Only 58% of the callers said they were asked about their pain at every clinical visit.

Why are so many cancer patients and survivors suffering from pain, particularly moderate or severe, when they are telling their clinicians about it and effective treatments exist to ease their suffering?

Evidence Illustrates Ongoing Communication Gaps. ACS CAN, the Society's advocacy affiliate, partnered with the Alliance of State Pain Initiatives and Pain & Policy Studies Group to survey physicians in Georgia and Washington about their knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding pain management. Although the doctors' responses to questions about their pain conversations with patients were consistent in both states, those findings did not match what our callers were reporting about pain discussions:

- Nearly all responding physicians (97% in WA and 93% in GA) said they ask their patients routinely about pain in clinic visits, *but fewer than 60% of our callers said they were asked about pain at every visit.*
- Less than half of responding physicians (44% in WA and 45% in GA) said they use any type of scale or other standardized tool to assess their patients' pain as part of those conversations.

These findings demonstrate a clear need and opportunity for the American Cancer Society and State Pain Initiatives to work together in promoting more informed, open communication between health care professionals and their patients about the importance of effective pain assessment and pain management to improve quality of life for patients, survivors, and their loved ones.

¹ American Cancer Society. *Cancer Facts & Figures 2009*. Atlanta: American Cancer Society; 2009.