



## Editorial comment

## Aspects of life and pain

Pekka Mäntyselkä\*



Faculty of Health Sciences, School of Medicine, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio and Primary Health Care Unit, Kuopio University Hospital, Kuopio, Finland

In this issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Pain*, Nygaard Andersen and co-workers [1] report on the psychosocial aspects of everyday life with chronic musculoskeletal pain. Their article is based on a systematic review of studies focusing on adults' psychosocial consequences related to clinical, everyday life or interpersonal aspects. In their review, the authors emphasize that in addition to experiencing pain, people with chronic pain are affected by depressive thoughts, disability, the low quality of life and severe disturbances in their family and other close relationships.

### 1. So many negative consequences of chronic pain on everyday life

In addition to depressive thoughts, anxiety, stress, disturbed interpersonal relationships and disability, there are several other psychological or social or psychosocial or societal consequences of pain. Among many consequences, Raspe lists the following ones: impaired handling of stress and psychological demands, limitation in activities of daily living, impaired leisure time activities, impaired social and sexual relations and activities and social isolation, the loss of household productivity, dependence on others, unmet health care needs, addictive behaviour, dissatisfaction with health care, adverse events, the impaired health related quality of life, the loss of income and increasing social gradients [2]. In one review like the present one – of course – it is reasonable to focus on common everyday life psychosocial factors affecting individual's life instead of trying to capture all possible personal and societal consequences.

### 2. The most common and most important cause of disability and early retirement

Chronic pain is common and it affects people's life seriously [3]. Pain epidemiology nowadays tends to focus more on risk factors and protective factors and consequences of pain. Verhaak and co-workers stated 16 years ago that “the important question is not

precisely how many patients experience pain each day, but the extent to which pain leads to disability, to loss of working days, to premature incapacity, or to unnecessary medical treatment” [3]. Increasing numbers of studies related to impact of pain have been published during the recent years [4]. For example, chronic musculoskeletal pain has shown to cause or at least impact on work related problems, disability, early retirement and increased cost [5]. Chronic pain may have devastating impact on personal life and close relations with the most vulnerable people being most often affected by the psychosocial burden [6,7].

### 3. Chronic pain causes a dysfunctional everyday life

In this context Nygaard Andersen and co-workers analyse the findings of the studies published in the most recent years. The authors present a comprehensive synthesis of the main effects of chronic musculoskeletal pain on the everyday life of people. The synthesis states that living with chronic pain affects the quality of life and causes disability, depressive thoughts, interpersonal conflicts and further may in general have far-reaching consequences for everyday life [1]. They did not find any strong evidence for chronic pain related anxiety or stress which may appear as surprising. The authors conducted a very thorough data collection and review with a well-defined selection and eligibility criteria. Considering the quite enormous amount of studies involved with pain and psychosocial factors the number of selected studies was not big. Still, in many addressed outcomes, the studies were quite heterogeneous in their measurements and subjects and particular studies were quite inconsistent. Therefore it is understandable that it was not always possible to sum up the most relevant findings of studies or to pool the quantitative data. Therefore the review had to be based on a qualitative review of particular studies [1].

### 4. Chronic pain of unknown aetiology is more burdensome than specific chronic pain conditions

The authors of the present review conclude that there is an agreement on a relationship between pain and disability and the quality of life. However, the most solid ground exists only under the relationship between chronic pain and disability. Interestingly, psychosocial aspects – especially depressive symptoms – seemed to play a more significant role in the non-specific chronic pain than

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [pekka.mantyselka@uef.fi](mailto:pekka.mantyselka@uef.fi)

in the specific pain conditions. Besides being consequences of pain, these factors are involved in the aetiology of non-specific chronic pain and therefore some groups of people are more vulnerable to these psychosocial interferences. Psychosocial factors studied in the present review may be both risk factors and consequences of chronic pain with a barely distinguishable manifestation. However, as the authors stated, their review did not explore the potential interpersonal differences behind these findings.

### 5. With functions of everyday life preserved, pain tolerance is higher

At the population level, pain related behaviour with concomitant symptoms and comorbidities may have more significant impact than just the central impairment due to pain [2]. The findings of a recent study indicated that subjects with low back pain prefer the functional abilities of everyday life rather than the intensity of pain [8]. Further, a new systematic review or qualitative research suggested that patients' everyday life preferences should be considered carefully in designing interventions of chronic musculoskeletal pain [9]. On the other hand, in the context of rehabilitation of chronic musculoskeletal pain, it seems to be that psychosocial risk factors (like yellow flags in low back pain) are known and can be assessed, but we do not yet know which interventions should be applied according to these assessments [10]. Out of this scope, it has been claimed that even social beliefs in general could be targets for preventive actions [2].

### 6. Vulnerable persons suffer the most negative consequences and need special attention

Everyday life aspects should be considered in the management and the prevention of chronic pain. Clinically relevant and useful variables are not always relevant from the point of view of the psychosocial aspects [2]. After all, it is evident that the everyday life aspects are important in the quality of life, functional capacity,

rehabilitation, and in the recovery from chronic pain. In addition to the implication stated by authors, one implication of this study could be to address the importance of developing, testing and implementing reliable, valid and feasible instrument to measure the psychosocial aspects of everyday life and their change both in the clinical and population-based studies of people suffering from chronic pain. Beyond the aim of the present review the more far-reaching implication is to investigate the most effective interventions to improve the psychosocial outcomes among often the most vulnerable people suffering from longstanding pain.

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