

Summit to Focus on Causes, Treatment of Pain

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Pain is a common affliction.

It can be chronic or acute. It can be crippling or simply annoying. Everyone has encountered pain throughout his or her life. But for something so common, many don't know how to deal with it. Often, conditions go untreated. Others may be over-treated. Some people may ignore their symptoms to avoid medication, while others become dependent on drugs for relief.

The **West Virginia Pain Initiative**, scheduled for Oct. 14, is bringing together experts for a one-day summit in Charleston to discuss these issues and more.

"The purpose of this summit is to raise awareness in West Virginia about pain and engage health care professionals and the general public around this issue," said **Jim Keresztury**, project director of the West Virginia Pain Initiative. "... We have more than 200 people registered for the event so there's obviously an interest here. I hope by the end of the day, we can walk away with ideas on what people would like the pain initiative to focus on."

The West Virginia Pain Initiative is a collaborative effort of the **Mary Babb Randolph Cancer Center at West Virginia University**, the **Mountains of Hope** program, the **West Vir-**

ginia Center for End of Life Care, the **American Cancer Society** and the **West Virginia Hospice Council**. The groups have combined to sponsor the one-day pain summit.

"There is much more to pain management than just taking medications," Keresztury said. "There's stress reduction, alternative therapies such as massage therapy, exercise and physical therapy."

But when it comes to medication, Keresztury said the West Virginia Pain Initiative wants to erase stigmas associated with drugs such as morphine and Oxycontin.

"We want to get drug abuse under control as much as law enforcement does," he said. "But we want to ensure that by dealing with those issues we're not putting up a barrier for patients that could benefit from the appropriate use of the drugs. We don't want people to think medication is a bad thing when used responsibly and as it is intended."

Controlling pain isn't the only focus of the summit. During the spring, the West Virginia Pain Initiative conducted a telephone survey throughout West Virginia. Residents were asked questions about chronic pain. According to the results, a significant number of West Virginia

residents experience pain on a regular basis, but they do not have a clear understanding of how that pain can be treated.

Arthritis and back pain were the two most common causes of pain reported in the survey. Seventy percent of respondents said they experience moderate to severe pain on a monthly basis. Nearly 60 percent of those said they have experienced the pain for more than three years.

Keresztury said many people do not seek treatment for their pain because they do not realize it should be treated as a separate ailment. Others do not know where to go for help.

"Some people are just afraid to get help because they're afraid the pain is related to a bigger problem," he said. "There's any number of reasons why people aren't properly treated, and we want to find out why that is and what we can do to help people."

Gail Katz, a representative with the **American Cancer Society's** Baltimore office, said events such as this week's pain summit are crucial to improving pain management in this country.

"Pain is not something that can be measured on a completely objective basis," Katz said. "I can take your temperature and see you're sick. I can take your blood pressure and see you're

sick ... With pain, there is no measurement. That is why it's sometimes hard for a patient to convey the problem. And that is why a physician may not always fully understand what a patient is feeling."

Katz said patients must be specific when describing pain to a physician. And when medication is necessary, she said physicians shouldn't be afraid to prescribe it.

"Physicians don't want the scrutiny that comes with prescribing something like Oxycontin," she said. "Pharmacies don't want to carry it because of the liability that comes with a drug that is attractive to criminals. But when you leave patients with the only option of using a lesser drug, you're leaving them in pain."

Despite the availability of effective treatments and pain management available in West Virginia, Keresztury said, residents continue to experience chronic pain that impairs their quality of life. The summit is bringing together health care professionals, elected officials and consumers to identify and address barriers to effective pain management in the state.

Information about pain management is available online at the **American Pain Society's** Web site at www.am-painsoc.org.