

RETHINKING PAIN ALTERNATIVES

WHITE PAPER



THE ALLIANCE
OF WOMEN
IN WORKERS' COMPENSATION

Introduction

The opioid epidemic in the United States has caused the workers' compensation industry to rethink pain management and how it responds to injured workers. Most experts will agree that long-term opioid use is not an effective pain management solution and does not substantially improve an injured worker's function over time. In many cases, pain drives medical treatment and increases disability durations. Ultimately, the injured worker continues to suffer and often does not attain optimal quality of life or level of productivity.

Recognizing these challenges, workers' compensation thought leaders are coming together to create solutions that put the injured worker's interests and well-being at the forefront. They are looking at issues, such as how to get in front of pain, ways to improve the injured worker's understanding of pain components, the importance of employee engagement, and alternative pain management treatments.

This white paper, **Rethinking Pain Alternatives**, provides an overview of fundamental pain management concepts and offers an inside look into pre-pain, acute pain, and chronic pain treatments currently being used. While there are no easy answers, there are common insights and proven practices that are beneficial in rethinking pain management and improving the injured worker's experience.

“When it comes to rethinking pain management, workers' compensation thought leaders are sharing perspectives and creating solutions around such issues as how to get in front of pain, ways to improve the injured worker's understanding of pain components, the importance of employee engagement, and alternative pain management treatments.”

KIMBERLY GEORGE

Fundamental concepts related to rethinking pain management

Science indicates pain is a multi-dimensional, complex brain phenomenon. Further, there are different types of pain. Pain may be manifested in a dull ache, throbbing, burning, stinging, soreness, or stiffness. As a result, pain can be difficult to diagnose, and individual responses to pain and treatment can vary.

Acute pain is different from chronic pain.

- Acute pain typically lasts less than three to six months. It is commonly thought of as a type of pain experienced with a sprain or laceration. As healing occurs, acute pain typically subsides and resolves itself.
- Chronic pain tends to last longer than six months and is typically ongoing pain. Chronic pain is frequently associated with an injury or health condition and can range from mild to severe.

In rethinking pain management, it is important to understand some of the common challenges that medical practitioners face today. It is also helpful to identify common themes and practices found to be effective in alleviating and treating pain.

“One of the greatest challenges to treating pain is that there is no device that accurately measures pain. Basically, pain is what the patient says it is and the chief ways to assess it is by how the person with pain describes it and how they act in response to it. Evidence shows that a multidisciplinary approach in which clinicians representing different disciplines collaborate to create individualized programs for patients has the greater likelihood to produce success in treating pain.”

ROBERT JAMISON, PH.D.

“Many people with chronic pain recognize pain is a human condition while suffering is a choice. In rethinking pain management, we should focus on creating an environment in which injured workers can become stewards of their own care in ways that are self-contained and self-reliant.”

MARK PEW

No means to accurately measure pain

There is no method or device to accurately measure pain. In practice, there are only two ways a medical professional can determine if a person is in pain:

- (1) By listening to what the patient says, and
- (2) By observing how the patient acts.

In talking with patients about pain, physicians will often ask a series of questions, such as how would you describe the pain?; when and where did the pain originate?; and how would you rate the intensity of pain? Additionally, physicians will look for cues such as writhing, bracing or guarding in making an assessment. Based on a combination of what the patient says and how the patient acts, physicians will formulate a plan for addressing pain.

“Rethinking chronic pain” was not only informative, it was inspiring. Many people’s lives are positively impacted by creative pain management approaches.”

MARIJO STORMENT, RN, BSN, CCM

“As all stakeholders in the workers’ compensation system continue to deal with the issue of how pain impacts individuals and their families, it is imperative that we all work co-operatively in constructing a model that recognizes the debilitating effects of prolonged opioid use and the need for reasonable and adequate alternatives without costly litigation.”

ALAN S. PIERCE, J.D.

“Those who live with chronic pain do not want to be defined by their pain. They want to be treated as normal individuals and focus on the activities they enjoy with family and friends.”

BECKY CURTIS, NBC-HWC

Challenges in formulating a pain management plan

In rethinking pain management, it is important to understand some of the common challenges to treating pain. In general, the way in which people perceive pain can be influenced by many factors, such as mood, past experiences, and individual differences. Moreover, individuals respond to pain and treatment differently.

Some of the key challenges to pain management include:

- **Communications between patient and clinician**
Because there is no method or device to accurately measure pain, communications between the patient and clinician can be difficult. Not only is it challenging to develop an initial treatment plan, it can be difficult to assess its effectiveness.
- **Past experiences**
Pain perception can also relate to past incidents and personal history. Adverse childhood events or past traumatic experiences can cause patients to report higher levels of pain or impact their response to treatment. Such experiences can alter a person's beliefs later in life and may contribute to someone catastrophizing or exaggerating pain.
- **Length of time elapsed**
Pain management can also be impacted by the length of time that elapses between the initial injury and when the injured worker seeks professional assistance. Since it is often difficult to distinguish between those who will heal on their own versus those who would benefit from pain intervention and treatment, there is often a delay in getting professional assistance, which can lead to complications in healing.
- **Presence of multiple co-morbidities**
Individuals with pain may also struggle with multiple co-morbidities, such as depression or chronic illness. They often begin to look for a “magic pill” or procedure that will readily address their situation. Over time, a disability mindset can set in resulting in negative habits, perceptions, and expectations that can be difficult to overcome.
- **Workers' compensation system complexities**
Pain arising from job-related injuries can be further exacerbated by the complexities of the workers' compensation system. A myriad of statutory rules and regulations impose added uncertainties and apprehension on injured workers.
- **Lack of collaboration**
Workers' compensation payers often have uninformed or unrealistic expectations about the pain management process and view pain specialists as an unnecessary and expensive component within the system. This inherent distrust and lack of understanding imposes additional barriers on all stakeholders within the system and can impede an injured worker's progress.

“Pain coaching specialists encourage patients to move from passivity to active engagement by using pain management techniques that focus on functional restoration as well as pain reduction. People with pain are taught coping skills and encouraged to make better choices to become more actively engaged in their health care.”

PATRICIA COLE, PH.D.

Effective and emerging pain management strategies

There is good news for those looking to rethink pain management strategies. Workers' compensation thought leaders continue to push boundaries and discover breakthroughs every day. While pain management is complex and there is still much to be learned, there are some incredible success stories highlighting effective treatment approaches. Common themes and proven practices emerge from these successes.

Using a multi-disciplinary approach

A multi-disciplinary approach that combines and coordinates many treatment modalities can be highly effective to manage pain. Using this approach, a team of pain specialists reviews diagnostic results and develops an individualized treatment plan. Clinical team members may include general practitioners, neurologists, chiropractors, physical therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, acupuncturists, pharmacists and others. Working together, these specialty providers determine how best to treat the patient and review ongoing progress.

Functional restoration approach

Using a functional restoration approach, an injured worker learns that pain is an experience and that there are ways to actively manage pain. Some of the bio-psycho-social modalities introduced include diaphragm breathing, exercise, movement and activity. Participants learn to shift focus from pain to function and to use tools to manage pain, but not necessarily eliminate it.

Collaborative approach

Injured workers are better served when key stakeholders collaborate as a group and focus on achieving common objectives. Patients can benefit by visiting pain management centers, seeing the disciplines and resources offered, and giving the selected treatment plan a chance to unfold. This allows the injured worker's best interests to remain at the forefront of the group's efforts.

Early intervention

Getting an injured worker to a pain specialist before complications occur is important. With better dialogue among key industry players, it might be possible to catch people earlier and start treatment sooner. This would allow pain specialists to complete procedures, rehabilitation, and care coordination right away and chart a pathway to a more complete recovery.

Positive narrative

Treating physicians should reinforce a healthy mindset and recognize that words matter. While physicians must be realistic in their communications, they should strive to be positive and discuss approaches that will foster maximum medical recovery and function. Also, providers should consider using a function scale instead of a pain scale as a way to modify the narrative and mindset.

Pre-pain and pre-habilitation

When a surgery is planned or anticipated, there are many actions that medical providers can take prior to the procedure to address pre-pain and foster pre-habilitation. Clinicians should help injured workers understand what pain is, and the role pain plays in the recovery process. This includes setting expectations and describing the type of pain a patient is likely to experience following surgery, how long it can be expected to last, and what treatment options are available.

“Increasing medical literacy among injured workers results in a better understanding of medical conditions as well as the treatment options available. Knowing how the body is likely to react tends to give patients a sense of empowerment in their recoveries and helps ensure they more fully engage in the process.”

ROBERT HALL, M.D.

Increased medical literacy

Increasing medical literacy among injured workers and patients is also valuable. Workers should understand their injury or medical conditions, as well as the treatment options available. Knowing how the body is likely to react and being able to apply self-care measures in certain situations is important. Such knowledge also tends to give patients a sense of empowerment in their recoveries and helps ensure they more fully engage in the process.

Technological advances

Technology advancements can aid in the development and delivery of pain management plans. Biometric and other data can be tracked and easily shared. Push notifications offer added assistance with appointment reminders, relaxation strategies, and other valuable recovery information. Some apps allow two-way messaging between a patient and a medical provider. Telemedicine offers added convenience by virtually connecting injured workers and providers without a need for travel.

Healthy lifestyle

While healthy choices and behaviors help prevent injuries, they can also facilitate recovery when an accident occurs. Employees should be educated and encouraged to make positive choices that include good nutrition, regular exercise, and adequate rest as a part of a healthy lifestyle. Both physical and mental health is vitally important.

Return to work mindset

If an employer is willing to take an injured worker back and gradually begins to reintroduce work, then that individual has a much higher chance of returning to a productive lifestyle. Generally, injured workers who express a strong desire to return to work are more likely to succeed.

Pharmacy management programs

Pharmacy management programs can also play a valuable role in the pain management equation. Formularies help ensure patients receive the right medication and protect patients from dangerous drug combinations. Pharmacy management programs can also lessen the risk of unintended opioid or narcotic addiction.

Non-pharmacological treatments

Mindfulness, meditation, yoga, behavioral cognitive therapies, and acceptance and commitment therapies have been shown to be effective pain management alternatives. Therapies involving art, music, and animals have also been used to alleviate pain and facilitate recovery. These types of therapies can alter people's moods and provide distraction from pain. When used in conjunction with more traditional medical treatments, these types of therapies tend to promote positive thinking and provide some alleviation.

“Pain lives in the brain and is a complex phenomenon that includes both mental and physical aspects. We often fail to address the suffering and unhelpful coping behaviors that accompany pain. When it comes to treating pain, we must address the whole person. One size does not fit all.”

GERALYN DATZ, PH.D.

“There is good news for those looking to rethink pain management strategies. Common themes and proven practices are beginning to emerge from collaborative industry discussions and will serve as a strong foundation on which future pain management approaches can be built.”

ANN SCHNURE

Effective and emerging pain management strategies / CONTINUED

Favored pain treatment and approaches

While individuals respond to pain and treatment differently, they tend to do better when they are receptive to the type of treatment recommended and believe they will benefit from it. As a result, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to pain management. The most effective approach and treatment plan will be tailored to the individual’s needs and preferences. Teaching new skills that activate other areas of the brain can calm the central nervous system.

Friends and family support

Support from friends and family is important to an individual’s recovery. However, friends and family should be coached to stop asking about an injured worker’s pain. Talking about pain can cause injured worker to focus on it and discomfort levels to rise. Conversations should be redirected to activities and events that the injured worker enjoys. Those with chronic pain do not want to be defined by pain. A normal environment that encourages self-reliance is beneficial.

Care and compassion

Pain management involves difficult cases – not difficult people. Care and compassion are an integral part of the healing process. A multi-prong, collaborative approach that puts the patient’s needs at the forefront shows considerable promise and potential when it comes to rethinking pain management.

“Many actions can be taken before pain events ever take place. Employees should be educated and encouraged to make positive choices that include good nutrition, regular exercise and adequate rest as a part of a healthy lifestyle. Not only does a healthy lifestyle help prevent an injury, it also facilitates recovery when an accident does occur and is an important part of the overall pain management process.”

TERESA BARTLETT, M.D.

“For larger organizations with a concentration of employees, offering general and occupational health care, physical therapy, mental health, and employee assistance services onsite can be a game-changer in caring for employees and producing positive results. These expanded offerings allow employers to focus on and treat the whole person rather than limiting treatment to a specific workplace injury.”

LINDA BUTLER

Summary and conclusion

Undoubtedly, pain is a complex, multi-dimensional brain phenomena that affects people differently. The inability to quantify pain, multiple factors influencing pain perception, and competing objectives within a complex workers' compensation are among the challenges pain specialists face.

While there is still much to be studied and understood as it relates to pain management, there are some common strategies that can serve as a strong foundation on which future pain management approaches can be built. Workers' compensation thought leaders who recognize the challenges and come together to share perspectives and create solutions that put the injured worker's interests and well-being at the forefront will be essential to advancements. These professionals know the importance of issues, such as how to get in front of pain, ways to improve understanding of pain components, the importance of employee engagement, and alternative pain management treatments.

It is the power of these collective ideas and creative collaborations that will ultimately redefine the way the workers' compensation industry approaches pain management. Ultimately, by taking a multi-disciplinary approach to pain management, we will see improved outcomes and can help enhance the lives of injured workers.

“Injured workers don’t always understand their pain or the solution to their pain. Focusing on pain is counterproductive and can increase the patient’s perception of pain. Recognizing that words matter, medical providers should redirect conversations about pain to conversations about function. A functional focus changes the narrative to something that is positive, measurable and that ultimately leads to pain reduction.”

MARCOS IGLESIAS, M.D.

“Care and compassion are integral to rethinking pain management. Workers’ compensation thought leaders who elevate these issues and collaborate with others to develop multi-faceted solutions are those who will drive positive change for the future.”

ARTEMIS EMSLIE

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Alliance description and purpose

The Alliance of Women in Workers' Compensation was formed to drive two main initiatives. The first objective is to educate and develop emerging leaders. The second initiative is to collaborate on emerging trends. The development and distribution of this white paper, Rethinking Pain Alternatives, demonstrates this commitment.



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