



## NIH STUDY FINDS CANCER PATIENTS' PAIN POORLY MANAGED

**Findings from the NIH State-of-the-Science Conference on Symptom Management in Cancer Pain, Depression and Fatigue say that pain is often under treated, in spite of the availability of effective interventions.** The conference, held July 15-17, brought together national experts to focus on cancer pain, depression, and fatigue; their occurrence, assessment, and treatment; barriers to effective treatment; and directions for future research.

**Dr. Donald Patrick, chair of the panel** and professor at the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at the University of Washington, **says, “Currently, cancer-related pain, depression, and fatigue are under treated and this situation is simply unacceptable — there are effective strategies to manage these symptoms, and all patients should have optimal symptom control.”** At a news conference announcing the report, Patrick said that **many doctors do not know how to control relentless pain and that medical schools do not provide adequate pain management education.**

Dr. Anthony T. Turrisi III, a radiation oncologist, said, **“We have to move to the point that patient comfort and care are a part of the cancer treatment agenda . . . . Some patients are more fearful of pain than they are of death itself.”**

The panel noted that these three symptoms interact, which may make them difficult to treat, but nevertheless cited several factors that can interfere with adequate symptom management. Among these are:

- Incomplete effectiveness of some treatments;
- A lack of sufficient knowledge regarding effective treatment strategies;
- Patient reluctance to report symptoms to caregivers;
- A belief that such symptoms are simply a part of the cancer experience that must be tolerated; and
- Inadequate coverage and reimbursement for some treatments.

The panel recommended that:

- Clinicians should use brief assessment tools routinely to ask patients about pain, depression, and fatigue and to initiate evidence-based treatments;
- Current evidence to support the concept of cancer symptom clusters is insufficient, and additional theoretically driven research is warranted;
- Research is needed on the definition, occurrence, and treatment of pain, depression, and fatigue alone and together in adequately funded prospective studies;
- All patients with cancer should have optimal symptom control from diagnosis throughout the course of illness, irrespective of personal and cultural characteristics.

A summary of the evidence report is available at [www.ahrq.gov/clinic/epcix.htm](http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/epcix.htm). The full text of the panel's statement will be at [consensus.nih.gov](http://consensus.nih.gov) and **the draft statement, *Symptom Management in Cancer: Pain, Depression and Fatigue*, is already posted.** (NIH News Release, 7/17; AP, 7/18)