



A week of pain

Students participate in week-long multi-disciplinary undergraduate pain program

by Jessica Whiteside

March 25, 2002 -- The crack of a puck against her knee in a Grade 5 floor hockey game introduced Ayala Ravek to life with chronic pain.

"If you've ever had a toothache or a terrible headache, imagine it all over your body. That's kind of what it's like all the time," said the Ottawa girl who has reflex sympathetic dystrophy — nerve pain typically triggered by a limb injury. Before her diagnosis, eight months after her injury, schoolmates and health professionals alike told her the pain was in her head. Now 14, Ravek joined a panel of pain sufferers who spoke to U of T students during Pain Week (March 18 to 22), an intensive addition to undergraduate pain education co-ordinated by an interfaculty committee of the Centre for the Study of Pain.

"One of the best ways to understand pain is through those who have lived with it," said Stephen Bruner, a second-year physical therapy student. Believed to be unique in North America and possibly Europe, the week-long program forms a 20-hour, core curriculum for pain studies across six health disciplines. The 550 participants in the inaugural program included third-year dentistry and pharmacy students and second-year medicine, nursing and physical and occupational therapy students.

Along with hearing from leading experts in research, management, advocacy and the ethical, legal and political issues around pain, the students worked in interdisciplinary groups to devise pain management plans for patients portrayed by actors. Some 120 also explored clinical scenarios online through innovative, electronic-learning techniques.

The curriculum gives students from different disciplines a common grounding in pain studies, in addition to their area-specific instruction, to prepare for a team approach to pain management in the workplace. It also aims to address a gap identified by the Canadian Pain Society between evidence-based pain management practices and what is provided by health professionals.

There is significant unrelieved pain in 50 to 80 per cent of cancer patients, 70 to 80 per cent of long-term care patients and 60 to 80 per cent of surgical patients, said Professor Judy Watt-Watson of nursing, chair of Pain Week. Describing pain as a major public health problem, she said the best way to prevent longer-term troubles such as chronic pain is to prevent or minimize acute pain.

"We have terrific ways to manage acute pain and if we know now that we are minimizing consequences for persistent problems, how can we ethically and morally not do this?" she said.

Nursing student Shari Valja, who has family members with chronic pain from workplace injuries, welcomed the interaction with students from other faculties.

"Out in the 'real world,' health professionals do not work in isolation, so it is vital to encourage this type of collaboration during our education," she said.

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