

Meanings of Pain

Simon van Rysewyk
Editor

Meanings of Pain

Volume 2: Common Types of Pain
and Language

 Springer

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ISBN 978-3-030-24153-7 ISBN 978-3-030-24154-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24154-4>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword

As a clinician/researcher I have spent more than 20 years listening to more than 23,000 patients with persistent pain, trying to understand who they are and what is their problem and how can we help them. It has been a humbling and human experience to share their road with them. They (the patients) have struggled to describe their pain, their distress and their losses. More often than not their experience of the medical system has been frustrating and unrewarding for them and in some cases accentuated the problem.

My experience as a physician is obviously influenced by my own cultural and personal take on pain, in my case a triple level spinal fracture as a medical student (and 4 years of back pain followed by recovery) and a C6 radiculopathy as a pain physician. I am one of the lucky ones—my nervous system seems hardwired to return to homeostasis over several months. My radiculopathy experience proved instructional to me on several levels—a complete failure of any medical treatment to make a difference to the agonizing pain, a hardening of my response to patients under my care (I more frequently ceased their opioids during this period) and ultimately a resolution of my pain when I took a medically prescribed holiday from my practice.

Why mention this? Because too often medicine takes a reductionist approach to the problem of pain. That most assuredly leaves the transfer of understanding of the experience hollow and superficial and any treatment of it necessarily incomplete and often unsatisfying. This book addresses a critical aspect of this problem, namely how to capture the lived experience and how to interpret the meaning of pain both for the experienter and for the observer.

This book should provide the reader with not only a vocabulary of language about pain and a number of ways in which meaning can be explored and captured but above all it should engender in the reader a sense of enquiry and self-reflection on how to take this information and apply it in the clinic. Many of us could do with less of the doing and more of the thinking about what the doing is for and what the doing represents. This multi-author, multi-disciplinary and multi-country contribution is a welcome addition to the knowledge base of persistent pain.

It is a striking fact that we know more and can predict more on the behavioural responses of the rat to acute and persistent pain than we understand the reactions of our fellow human beings in a cultural/societal/interpersonal and family context to persistent pain. This book bridges that gap of understanding.

As an avid reader of primary foundational texts in medicine such as the textbooks and treatises of Sir William Osler, Silas Weir Mitchell, John J Bonica and Harvey Cushing, amongst other giants of medicine, I have been struck not only by their deep empathy for the people they treated but also by their extensive period of listening to and observing of the patient. Hours of observation was not unusual for these doctors and from their deep observational skills they assembled many first proper documentations of conditions, pathological hypotheses and attempts at treatments (some spectacularly successful). The long stay inpatient nature of care in the hospital at that time no doubt aided their observation as well as the serial observation of long periods of the natural history of the condition, but it was the acuteness of their attention that stood out in their published works. In our delivery of modern (minutes) medicine, we could do well to spend some time immersing ourselves in the lives of our patients if we want to understand what they are going through. To do that we will need a conceptual framework of that experience just as much as a conceptual framework of diseases and their pathology, and this book will hopefully give you, the reader, those concepts.

It is my opinion that this three-volume work will stand as the definitive reference work in this field. I believe it will enrich the professional and personal lives of health care providers, researchers and people who have persistent pain and their family members. The combination of framework chapters with chapters devoted to analysing the lived experience of pain conditions gives the requisite breadth and depth to the subject. I commend Simon van Rysewyk for the herculean task of taking on the birth of a tome so wide in scope and ambition.

Newcastle, NSW, Australia

Marc A. Russo

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