



7 October

Pain clinics seeing more patients faking illness because of social media, conference hears

Pain clinics are seeing a new phenomenon of patients influenced by social media complaining of symptoms they've found on the internet, a meeting of pain medicine experts in Adelaide will be told this weekend.

Dr Trushna Murgahayah, an Adelaide-based psychiatry registrar with an interest in consultation-liaison psychiatry, says pain clinics are seeing a rise in "Munchausen syndrome" where patients present with "complaints of symptoms which they have extracted from the internet in hopes of obtaining certain treatment or getting a particular diagnosis."

"Munchausen syndrome by internet is increasingly becoming more common in pain clinics and this is a rising trend worldwide," she explains.

Munchausen's by internet (also known as factitious disorder) is when a person joins an internet support group for people with a serious health or chronic pain condition and then claim to have the illness themselves.

Dr Murgahayah is speaking at the Faculty of Pain Medicine of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists' Spring Meeting in Adelaide on 8 October in a session debating the impact of social media on chronic pain management.

More than 100 delegates are attending the meeting which is exploring a range of issues relevant to pain medicine including mental health challenges for patients and practitioners, the cost of health care, pain programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, artificial intelligence and robotics in spinal treatments.

Dr Murgahayah explains how the creation of online groups encourages patients to get together and "exchange information which is then used by other patients to get certain perceived benefits or treatment from health services."

"It is a rising trend worldwide and social media has made information available to all without any regulations in place. "

Dr Murgahayah says some examples include users of social media self-diagnosing with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder after watching TikTok videos, trying to obtain analgesics for pain relief when it is not clinically indicated and at times feigning medical symptoms to get ongoing treatment.

"As clinicians these are all new challenges we are now facing, and it is crucial to redirect our patients to validated online resources that are available for pain management. There

are guidelines that have been proven to be beneficial in the treatment of chronic pain and patients should be encouraged to explore these resources,” she says.

“Essentially, this means adopting a common language with patients to ensure they are given optimum care and treatment.”

For more information or to request interviews, please contact ANZCA Media Manager Carolyn Jones on +61 3 8517 5303, +61 408 259 369 or cjones@anzca.edu.au.