

Cancer Pain

By Bill Hobby

"Pain is a more terrible lord of mankind than even death itself," Albert Schweitzer once said. Prolonged pain destroys the quality of life, erodes the will to live, and sometimes drives people to suicide.

One of the most common causes of severe, unrelieved, intractable pain is cancer. Modern medicine can cure some cancers and dramatically extend life in other cases. Medicine can also relieve the pain that so often goes with cancer, if we will just let it. Freedom from pain is the difference between extending life and prolonging it.

Strange as it seems, millions of people all over the world suffer needlessly from cancer pain, not because doctors do not know how to relieve the pain but because often they will not.

They frequently do not relieve pain because they often are unwilling to prescribe morphine, or at least not enough of it to do any good. And sometimes when they do prescribe enough to relieve the patient's agony, nurses won't administer the medication or make the patient beg for the relief the doctor has ordered.

Why? Our society is so concerned about the abuse of drugs that we sometimes do not realize the difference between legitimate use and abuse. Doctors may be afraid that the patient may become addicted. They may also be afraid of losing their medical licenses. Texas has already amended its Medical Practice Act to correct that problem, though further amendments may be needed.

Texas begins next Saturday to focus attention on the terrible problem of pain and how it can be better treated. Governor Ann Richards has proclaimed next Saturday, June 1, as "Freedom From Cancer Pain Day".

The Texas Cancer Pain Initiative has its first meeting in Austin on that day. The TCPI is a group of professional health care organizations concerned about eliminating needless suffering. The TCPI has been founded through the efforts of Dr. C. Stratton Hill, Jr., director of the Pain Service at the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer in Houston.

The group includes the Texas Medical Association, the Texas Nurse Association, the Texas Cancer Council, the Texas Pain Society, and the Texas Division of the American Cancer Society.

TCPI will be primarily an educational organization. It will try to make people more aware of the difference between the medical use of narcotics to relieve pain and the abuse of narcotics that is so common in our society.

The first such group was founded in Wisconsin. Michigan, Vermont, and Arizona have followed. Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop has endorsed the movement.

What are the medical problems involved in prescribing narcotics for the relief of severe pain? Can patients become addicted?

Very rarely.

The psychologically healthy patient who takes a narcotic to relieve pain is quite a different case from the addict who takes it to alter a mood, to become euphoric.

Morphine is the safest, most effective painkiller known for constant, severe pain. But even in countries where it is legal, like the U.S. and Great Britain, doctors may prescribe doses that are too small or too infrequent to help because of the fear of addicting patients.

But studies show that patients taking drugs for pain do not rapidly increase their tolerance for the drug, as addicts do. They do not have withdrawal symptoms--do not crave the drug when it is discontinued.

When narcotics are prescribed to prevent pain, rather than to cure it after it has set in, they can be used in smaller amounts. Smaller amounts can be used to control pain around the clock without producing mental clouding and other side effects.

Texas law now recognizes the difference between a cancer patient and a street addict. Two years ago the Legislature passed the Intractable Pain Treatment Act, assuring that no Texan requiring narcotics for pain relief should be denied them because of a doctor's fear of losing his license.

Texas law is now similar to federal law in that it recognizes the legitimate medical use of narcotics to relieve pain.

The goal of the Texas Cancer Pain Initiative is simply to rescue people whose lives are now being ruined by pain. It can do that by taking away the cultural and legal barriers that stand between a patient and an end to agony.

After all, a physician has a duty to relieve a patient's pain and suffering. That's what the doctor swore to do in the Hippocratic Oath.

Written in 1991.