

## Cancer and pain

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Cancer is generally painless – but if you feel pain don't accept your doctor's opinion that it can't be cancer. If a tumour presses against a nerve or other healthy tissue it may indeed cause pain.

Pain is a subject about which a great deal could and should be written. It is a subject that divides establishment doctor and patient profoundly as this true conversation reveals.

Patient I have this pain. It goes right across my back from the spine round to the side.

Doctor Cancer doesn't cause pain.

Patient (slightly bewildered by the doctor's reply) Yes, but I have this pain. I've had it for some time. It is all over here (indicating the rear pelvic area)

Doctor No, the tumour is quite painless.

Patient (Thoroughly confused) It's very painful, especially round here. (indicating the hip)

Doctor (impatient at the patient's inability to understand simple facts). Cancer tumours don't cause pain.

Husband (impatient with doctor) She's telling you she's in pain and that she wants you to do something about it!!!:

In this case the doctor is only focusing on the cancer, not on the patient's needs. This is a true conversation. The patient was my wife. And in this case the doctor was wrong. The tumour caused pain because it was rubbing against another tissue or nerve.

Doctors generally ignore pain because it is a 'broad pathway' – too many possible causes express themselves as pain – and so it does not in any way aid diagnosis. The degree of pain is no help in ascertaining the extent of the problem. Doctors, therefore, are unable to analyse the pain and trace it easily back to its cause. Since it is not part of the problem and not helpful in diagnosing the problem, doctors can only ignore it.

Patients need to understand that pain – because it is entirely subjective and can never be measured objectively – is not a major part of any established medical equation when it comes to making decisions. This is simply a fact.

### Terminal pain

Cancer does cause pain when it reaches a terminal stage. This pain is extreme and it is managed – if that is the word – usually with morphine. It is caused when the tumour takes over the body's energy-generating system for the purpose of its own energy requirements – this is the pain of the body's own tissues dying.

There are other ways of managing pain apart from morphine and anyone suffering chronic pain should investigate the books generally available on the subject. The problem with morphine as a pain-management tool is that it can so disorientate patients that they are unable to respond sensibly to the people around them. For the dying person and those people seeking to come to terms with death this can result in traumatic loss.

The final stage of death by cancer may entail a state of terminal confusion. But this confusion may not be total. I would guess that terminal confusion is to be found more often in hospitals than at home.

For further information, read the very comprehensive pain control book: *You Don't Have to Suffer* by Susan Lang and Richard Patt, Oxford University Press

### **Non–drug pain control**

A few non–standard ways of controlling pain have also come to my attention. One is to place cabbage leaves against the skin. One woman who could find no other relief from intense pain found that lying on a bed of raw cabbage leaves gave her much comfort. A man I spoke to on a radio phone–in programme told me that, unable to get adequate pain relief from his doctors, he went to a spiritual healer. His comment: ‘I don’t feel pain any more.’ Lastly, American therapist Evelyn Silvers uses endorphins – the brain’s own pain–killing drugs. Patients are told to concentrate hard on imagining they are building up their own supply. Over a period of minutes they are told to keep increasing the amount they are producing. Then they are allowed to release them into the bloodstream. She reports that chronic pain resistant to other treatments has disappeared using this technique. One is reminded of Deng Xiaoping’s famous dictum: ‘It doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice’; the same is true of painkillers.