

Napa doctors become sleuths to find the elusive sources of aches and pains
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 **BOOKMARK**

Register Staff Writer

By PAT STANLEY

They suffer in silence, victims of unrelenting pain.

Their discomfort may be caused by a bad back, an internal malady, or even psychological depression. But many people are in chronic pain, and their discomfort is grabbing more and more medical attention.

In Napa, at least two doctors specialize in pain management, and they take different approaches to their discipline.

Invisible suffering

"Patients with the most profound disability, you don't see," said Dr. Eric Grigsby. "They keep their pain invisible."

"They can't get to church on Sunday. You don't see them at the grocery store. You don't see them at the kids' ballgame."

Their pain often keeps them at home, suffering. But in many cases, there is hope.

Grigsby, who opened a practice in Napa in 1992, said many people suffer profound life changes because of their pain. "There are many in this community," he said.

Pain often leads patients into a dangerous downward spiral of profound disability and psycho-social issues -- even suicide.

"A common theme of chronic illness and (resulting) loss of jobs, relationships, money, (mental) faculties ... is depression," he said. "It's truly a tragedy that someone is suffering such chronic disabling pain that they are contemplating taking their own life."

He said strategies for helping such patients fall into three categories: medicine, injections and implanted devices that deliver medicine or electrical stimulation.

Grigsby, who also holds degrees in economics and biology, grew up in Tennessee and went to medical school at Boston University. He also studied at Brown University in Rhode Island.

He was a resident doctor at Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for two years before leaving to practice anesthesiology.

He later became director of the Mayo Clinic pain hospital, and was the founding director

of the pain clinic at UC Davis.

He worked briefly as an anesthesiologist at Queen of the Valley Hospital.

Nearly three-quarters of Grigsby's pain patients suffer from spine-related disorders, he said. These can range from a herniated disc, which is easily treated, to patients who are quadriplegic or have suffered spinal injuries or tumors.

Many female patients have suffered post-menopausal compression fractures, he said. "That causes a whole lot of pain," said Grigsby.

Pain doctors are essentially detectives seeking the root cause of a patient's problem. "Part of the fascination with the pain practice is that it goes across all specialties," he said.

Grigsby said pain specialists are just as much patient advocates as they are medical sleuths.

Another "common thread" for patients in relentless pain is frustration.

"It may not be life-threatening, but it threatens the quality of life," he said. "We take it seriously. Our goal is to maintain good quality of life with minimal risk of side effects. Chronic pain and really affect your life."

He said only about 40 percent of his patients are of Medicare age. About half of Grigsby's patients are women, although the nationwide average runs slightly higher.

Grigsby's pain clinic at 1130 Main Street features a free research library of pain management resources, funded by a nonprofit organization he established for education and research, especially for patients with limited resources.

The doctor hosts an annual three-day national conference on pain management.

Mind-body connection

Can you die from a broken heart?

Maybe. Maybe not. Pain can cause extreme emotional stress, according to Dr. Corby Kessler, a pain management specialist and medical director of the 14-bed acute rehabilitation center of Queen of the Valley Hospital. He said brain scans show that when people are emotionally saddened, "pain lights up."

Modern medicine is beginning to understand how psychological issues play a role in aggravating pain issues, he said.

"A major complaint from patients to their doctors when they are depressed is aches and pains," he said.

Kessler grew up in Castro Valley. He was an undergraduate student at Stanford University, and studied medicine at the University of Illinois in Chicago. He did his residency in physical medicine and rehabilitation at the New York Medical College.

While attending college, Kessler swam and coached swimming. "In college I taught the disabled how to swim. It was a wonderful transition. I went into physical medicine and rehab," he said.

In addition to his Queen of the Valley work, the doctor also has a private practice in pain management. His patients range from high school athletes to people in their 70s who have difficulty walking and suffer from arthritis.

Unlike Grigsby, he does not use implant surgery or interventional procedures. Kessler's practice focuses on what he calls "the three P's of pain management: psychological, physical and pharmacological."

Sometimes the work is simple. Like checking to make sure a patient complaining of lower back pain is wearing appropriate shoes.

Other times it gets complicated. The psychological impact of pain, the doctor said, can be disabling. Patients unable to work because of pain can become seriously depressed. "We can not ignore stress as part of pain management," he said.

Stress, he said, can be a complication of the primary problem, causing pain level to "spiral" upwards.

Most of Kessler's practice involves the use of proper medications. He said there is a some controversy over the use of "balanced narcotic medications" so as not to create addicts.

Although he may prescribe high doses of medication, the practice is heavily regulated. He has to administer urine toxicology screenings to be sure no other drugs are being mixed with his prescriptions.

"There are always new drugs," he said. "We try to find a safer drug. And we understand how psychological issues play a role in aggravating pain issues."

There's a great danger of people abusing prescription drugs. In fact, Kessler said, there is more abuse of prescription drugs on school campuses than smoking marijuana or drinking beer.

The doctors may have differing approaches, but they are both seeking to find one thing -- the source of the pain.

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Diane wrote on Apr 5, 2007 8:53 PM:

" After a work injury in '93 left me with severe back problems and pain,I have searched for that magical cure for my pain. After trying everything we could find,and seeing 4 pain management doctors,my daughter found Dr. Grigsby for me. I have been there for 4 years now.I finally found a friend in the pain industry! It is nice to finally have a doctor who listens,cares,and acts on whats being said. I see the nurse practitioner,who is wonderful.She laughs when I come in each month with my "grocery list" If you are hurting,this is the place to go. "