The Churack Chair of Chronic Pain Education and Research

A Case for Support

“All physicians who deal with clinical illnesses will be confronted with chronic pain patients. No one should receive a medical degree without learning core knowledge about both acute and chronic pain, including cancer pain and non-malignant pain.”

John D. Loeser, MD,
Departments of Neurological Surgery and Anaesthesiology and Pain Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle.
In simple terms, “Chronic Pain”, also known as ‘persisting pain’, is any pain which exists longer than expected. Such pain may arise where there is tissue damage (nociceptive pain) or where there is injury to nerves, spinal cord or the brain (neuropathic pain). Chronic Pain has many causes: work injury, car accident, arthritis, cancer, postsurgical pain, spinal cord injury and more.

It is estimated that over 3 million Australians suffer from some form of debilitating Chronic Pain and that the total cost of this disease, to the Australian economy, is in excess of $34.4 billion annually comprised mainly of productivity losses and healthcare costs. These costs do not accurately account for the unquantifiable damage done to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the sufferer and his or her family and friends.

It is clear from these statistics that Chronic Pain is a significant health issue for Australia and all Australians.

It is also clear that a singular approach to research, treatment and education regarding chronic pain is inadequate in order to address the multi-faceted effects of Chronic Pain. New approaches to treatment are badly needed but this will only come from research into the mechanisms that produce Chronic Pain and the translation of these findings into education and application.

Therefore, it is vital that an integrated approach to research and education of healthcare practitioners and sufferers of chronic pain is undertaken to minimise the psychological, social and physical impacts caused by this disease.

Sadly, common pain relief medication can prove ineffective and many of the drugs that are used to treat the pain can have debilitating side effects.

Pain management now focuses on helping people to live with, and improve, their pain tolerance by seeking advice from a range of health professionals, including physiotherapists, psychologists, occupational therapists and neurologists.

This “team approach” is considered key in managing pain as it facilitates rehabilitation. Experts state that they are not in the business of curing, but helping, sufferers by providing the “tools” they need for rehabilitation.

These “tools” include access to specialised physiotherapists for improved musculoskeletal function, cognitive behaviour therapy in order to manage pain and occupational therapy for functional movement matters. Pain sufferers are encouraged to work through fear and avoidance behaviour that can be detrimental to overcoming pain.

Pain Management research, to date, has shown that no single treatment will return patients to a normal, pain-free life. Instead, current pain research and pain management methods aim to improve a patient’s quality of life and assist them in reclaiming their shattered life.

Chronic Pain has been labelled the biggest unrecognised health problem in Australia today. The secret to addressing this situation lies in research and pain management education.

It is of vital importance to educate our medical and allied health undergraduates in this area and develop effective interventions to reduce the burden of this problem on the community as well as to reduce personal suffering and disruption to life.

Pain relief is widely recognised as a basic human right. It is our responsibility, indeed our duty, to relieve suffering wherever possible.
Geoff Churack, a successful Western Australian businessman, has suffered from chronic neuropathic pain for more than five years. His condition has resulted from past injuries and unsuccessful back surgery. His pain is constant and unremitting and has had a devastating effect on his personal, business and family life.

Since the pain commenced, Geoff has independently researched chronic pain and has been prepared and willing to try numerous types of treatment options. Geoff’s firsthand experience of the impact such pain can have on all aspects of an individual’s life (and on the lives of family and friends) has motivated him to provide whatever assistance he can, financially and otherwise, to see that research and treatment into chronic pain is advanced.

Geoff, with time, has come to realise that the medical profession does not always possess the knowledge needed to address the many issues that Chronic Pain sufferers face. He was appalled to discover that the teaching of Pain Medicine to graduates at Australian universities is not an essential part of a medical degree.

This is supported by Matthew J Bair, MD MS. Pain Medicine 2011; 12:1139-1141, who states:

“There is a significant gap in medical school education related to pain management……”

And again, John D. Loeser, MD, Departments of Neurological Surgery and Anaesthesiology and Pain Medicine, University of Washington Seattle, who also states:

“I believe that there are five pre-eminent crises in pain management today:

i) the lack of evidence for the outcomes of most of the things providers do for patients;

ii) the lack of adequate education of primary care providers about pain and how to treat it;

iii) the largely unknown value of opioid treatment for patients with chronic non-malignant pain;

iv) funding for the providers of pain management; and

v) access to multidisciplinary care.”

With this in mind, Geoff and his wife Moira – with the support of their family – have generously donated $1 million to The University of Notre Dame Australia to assist the University in researching this important area of medicine, the outcome of which will benefit all Australians.

Motivated by the Churack Family’s significant leading gift, The University of Notre Dame Australia wishes to establish The Churack Chair of Chronic Pain Education and Research – a prestigious, endowment-funded, academic staff appointment – with the aim of furthering research into, and the teaching of, Chronic Pain and rehabilitation.
Our vision and goal is to “build a bridge” between the laboratory based researchers, the health professionals and the sufferers of chronic pain. This collaborative approach will ensure that the ‘research’ reaches the Health Professionals and – most significantly – is made available to Chronic Pain sufferers.

Why The University of Notre Dame Australia?

Notre Dame is an Australian university which has embraced both the modern Australian university tradition and the ancient and esteemed traditions of Catholic universities both in Europe and North America. It has grown from a single campus university in the West End of Fremantle with less than 100 students, to a university with campuses in Fremantle, Broome and Sydney and an enrolment of over 11,000 students. It has now become one of Australia’s leading universities.

With Schools of Medicine, Nursing, Physiotherapy, Health Sciences, and with courses offered in Counselling, Notre Dame is well placed to bring together health professionals to jointly address health issues.

The Churack Chair, when established, will attract to Notre Dame a nationally or internationally recognised senior academic whose scholarly activity and accomplishments will enrich research and teaching in line with the Objects of the University.

The Churack Chair will be part of the School of Medicine which has a well-established record of research into general practice and primary health care. The Chair will also have the responsibility of ensuring that research undertaken through the School of Medicine is translated into the education offered to our medical students – thus guaranteeing that all students have a solid understanding of chronic pain upon graduation.

The Chair will be responsible for building relationships and forming research partnerships with those organisations currently undertaking laboratory based research into Chronic Pain in ways which are consistent with our Objects, including major hospitals, clinics and general practice networks.
Notre Dame and Murdoch University – working together

Murdoch University, which has established itself as one of Australia’s leading universities for research into Chronic Pain and Inflammatory Diseases, is also enthusiastic to be a part of this Chronic Pain project.

This reputation has come mainly under the direction and dedication of Professor Peter Drummond and Adjunct Professor Philip Finch. They each bring more than 25 years of research and experience to the table and are considered internationally as two of Australia’s leading pain researchers.

As a result, Murdoch University with its established reputation, people and research will collaborate and share with The University of Notre Dame Australia’s School of Medicine and The Churack Chair.

With Notre Dame’s highly respected Schools of Medicine, Nursing, Physiotherapy and Health Sciences, the impact of a partnership such as this would be profound.

There is a need for knowledge translation.

The University of Notre Dame Australia will ensure that research undertaken is translated into the education offered to its medical students and associated health disciplines – thus guaranteeing that all students possess a solid understanding of Chronic Pain upon graduation.

Once one institution includes this teaching as a core discipline others will follow, leading to an explosion of knowledge and co-ordinated care for sufferers of chronic pain!
We invite you to partner with us

Thanks to the generous support of the Churack Family a third of Notre Dame's fundraising target has already been secured. However, the University is seeking to raise an additional $2 million in order to establish The Churack Chair of Chronic Pain Education and Research.

Philanthropic individuals who understand the importance of private donations to advance research and teaching have the unique ability to be a part of “The Churack Chair of Chronic Pain Education and Research” and to invest in the promise it holds.

Your contribution will allow Notre Dame to actively embark upon a worldwide recruitment search to attract an internationally acclaimed medical specialist whose accomplishments will enrich research and teaching in line with the University’s mission and ethos. Not only will this aid and equip future medical graduates in the area of specialised Chronic Pain treatment and care, it will shape the direction of Chronic Pain research and rehabilitation – across Australia and throughout the World.

All gifts to The University of Notre Dame Australia are fully tax deductible and will be acknowledged accordingly. The University of Notre Dame Australia is endorsed as a deductible gift recipient and as an income tax exempt entity under the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997.

To discuss your support of The Churack Chair of Chronic Pain Education and Research you are invited to contact the Manager of the Vice Chancellery and Special Projects on (08) 9433 0860.
The Objects of The University of Notre Dame Australia are:

a) the provision of university education within a context of Catholic faith and values; and

b) the provision of an excellent standard of –

   i) teaching, scholarship and research;
   ii) training for the professions; and
   iii) pastoral care for its students.