



The Royal Australasian  
College of Physicians

## **Childhood trauma linked to chronic pain in adulthood**

Media Release

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Sexual, mental and physical abuse in childhood has been linked to chronic pain and poor physical health as adults, according to medical specialists.

Repeated trauma as a child is now understood to influence how we deal with pain in adulthood, with victims either not responding to treatment, or pain being out of proportion to its cause.

The link has led to calls for doctors and specialists to consider a trauma history check as part of patient evaluations.

Leading Australian Psychiatrist Dr Michelle Atchison said that the majority of abuse happens between the ages of three and eight years of age, by someone known to the child.

“The earlier the age the trauma occurs, the more likely they are to develop Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD),” said Dr Atchison.

“CPTSD presents itself in the form of bodily symptoms such as medically unexplainable somatic syndromes, coronary heart disease, chronic bronchitis and asthma, chronic widespread pain disorders, irritable bowel syndrome and psoriasis.

“Early life trauma occurs at a time when the brain and body are developing, experiencing trauma affects how you learn to cope with stress, how you view your body, and it also changes brain development, personality and hormones.

“Later in life, physicians may see CPTSD present itself when adult patients have ongoing, chronic pain and are not responding to usual treatment, or their pain seems out of proportion to its cause.

“If physicians see their patient has a chronic medical condition/s that is not responding to treatment, they need to consider trauma as the cause of the pain.”

In Australia only about 38 per cent of those abused report it, either because they are too young, want to protect the offender or are worried about not being believed.

“Often all it takes is someone to ask. Patients are unlikely to be forthcoming with the information. That’s why it’s important to do a trauma check as part of the overall patient history check,” explained Dr Atchison.

RACP President Nicholas Talley supported Dr Atchison's recommendations.

"Asking can be the difference between someone getting psychological help right now and suffering for several more years without help.

"If a patient is not getting better in a specific timeframe, physicians need to be considering trauma," he said.

Trauma warning signs in patients:

- feeling pain longer than the average adult would in the same situation
- presenting repeatedly with ill-defined problems such as headaches and abdominal pain
- drug and alcohol dependencies
- body image issues, including eating disorders
- self-destructive behaviour
- disassociation and altered states of consciousness
- difficulties with interpersonal relationships.

Editor's note: Dr Michelle Atchison will be presenting *Childhood Trauma, Adult Pain* at RACP Congress on Monday, May 16 from 11.45am – 12.15pm.

**Ends**

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The College offers 60 training pathways. These lead to the award of one of seven qualifications that align with 45 specialist titles recognised by the Medical Board of Australia or allow for registration in nine vocational scopes with the Medical Council of New Zealand.