Nurses need better training in managing pain

Pain is a significant health issue for older people that can lead to poor quality of life. It is often associated with co-morbidities and frailty, but is under-reported and often poorly managed, especially in people with cognitive impairment.

Factors complicating pain identification include its subjective nature, the terminology people use, and older people’s stoicism and tendency to write off pain as an inevitable consequence of ageing.

Monica Furjancic and colleagues’ survey of nurses working on medical, surgical and older people’s care wards in two hospitals shows that about one third of experienced nurses had inadequate knowledge of pain management (evidence & practice, page 32). Some had erroneous beliefs about opioid addiction or could not identify opioid effects on older people.

Although only a small study, it illustrates some of the complexities of understanding pain in older people.

It also shows that education is vital to improving our detection and understanding of pain.

Yet attendance on pain management training courses does not necessarily increase nurses’ knowledge and application to practice. Most survey respondents lacked adequate pharmacological knowledge about managing older people’s pain, regardless of whether they had attended training sessions.

The authors conclude that training in pain management should be expert-led, real-life or simulation based, and tailored to older people in specific care settings.

Their conclusion suggests a fundamental review is required of how the ageing process, frailty and pain management in old age are taught and learned in all care settings. This could then lead to huge improvement in quality of life and the ability of individuals to enjoy old age.

‘Training in pain management should be tailored to older people in specific care settings’