

A Conversation with Dr. Kayla Herr, as interviewed by Dr. Sonya Hardin

Dr. Sonya Hardin: Today at the East Carolina University College of Nursing, we have Dr. Kayla Herr, professor and associate dean for faculty in the College of Nursing at the University of Iowa. Over the past 25 years, Dr. Herr has been engaged in a program of research, scholarship and professional activities focused on the problem of pain in older adults with an emphasis on assessment strategies focused on improving practices through translation research and end of life care. She is the co-director of the Iowa John A. Hartford Center of Geriatric Nursing Excellence and she is known nationally and internationally for her strategies for improving assessment and management of pain in elders.

She has published extensively on the topic of elder pain. She is also quite well known among American Geriatric Society with the work that she's done on persistent pain guidelines and she consults nationally and federally regarding effective pain care for older adults. She's been involved with the National Institute on Aging, the National Institute of Health Pain Consortium and the FDA and is also known for leading national efforts to provide best practice tools and resources to improve pain care for older adults in long-term care settings. Today what I'd like to do is take this opportunity just to have a short conversation with her and I've developed a few questions that I wanted to ask her about, so let's get started. I'd first like to talk with you a little bit about your experience as a pain researcher. How do you define pain?

Dr. Kayla Herr: I define pain the same way that Margo McCaffery did early in nursing which is, "Pain is whatever the person experiencing it says it is." It's multi-dimensional. We believe in the biocycle social model of pain, so there's a lot of different elements that feed into the pain experience. Nobody knows the pain like the person that's experiencing it does. We have to get information from them about it.

Dr. Sonya Hardin: How did you become interested in pain as your topic of research?

Dr. Kayla Herr: As a young nurse, I moved home one summer to take care of my grandmother who had metastatic pancreatic cancer and experiencing her death, which was not comforted, she experienced a fair amount of suffering. She was afraid of taking pain medication because she'd get addicted, even though she's in the final weeks of her life. All she had ordered for pain management was 30 mg of codeine PRN, as needed, which for someone experiencing what she was, was not sufficient. She did have a lot of discomfort and I came away from that experience thinking there has to be a better way, and there wasn't much in the literature at the time about do you assess and treat pain in older people, and so that started my research trajectory.

Dr. Sonya Hardin: Can you share with me what you think about the current pain scales and measurement techniques that we have when we're trying to evaluate pain in the older adult?

Dr. Kayla Herr: We do have reliable and valid tools for assessing pain in older persons, both from the perspective of getting information from those who are cognitively intact and can use a pain intensity scale versus tools that we can use to help us assess pain in people that are ... have advanced dementia and can't tell us what they're experiencing. I think the challenge is and what we see clinically, is people relying only on a tool or a scale and not looking at a more comprehensive assessment. We need to be looking at ways to enhance the overall assessment process.

Dr. Sonya Hardin: I'm wondering if you can talk with me just a little bit about the use of narcotics to treat pain. That's certainly been in the literature pretty heavily lately about opioid addiction.

Dr. Kayla Herr: It's certainly a hot topic right now. What's happening is federally trying to address the opioid epidemic and increase in misuse and abuse and deaths related to opioids. That is spilling over onto pain management and how comfortable people are using opioids to treat pain management. It may impact acute pain and end of life pain, but those are areas where there's been less issues about opioids. The concerns are more with chronic pain management. A lot of concerns have come up in the recent years because we don't have a lot of evidence about the effect of opioids over a longer period of treatment time. There are new guidelines out. The CDC just released guidelines about the use of opioids for chronic pain and strong concerns about using them and using them wisely with the appropriate patients to make sure that those that need them have access, but that we're providing better education. We're using better monitoring techniques, better screening techniques for those that might be at risk and in putting in treatment plans that address that.

Dr. Sonya Hardin: Can you tell me what you think about using social media and apps to promote pain management?

Dr. Kayla Herr: This is another exploding area. In fact I just saw a paper recently. There's over 200 apps available that have to do with pain. To me the most important thing is evaluating the quality and evidence behind the apps that are available because when you go on the internet, there's products that are well done and have some science behind them and then there are others that are just fluff. There certainly are tools that are ready to be used for pain research, and tools that are ready for patients to use for patient education and monitoring, but it's sorting through those that are quality versus those that are not.

Dr. Sonya Hardin: Is there any organization right now that is putting their stamp on any of these apps that are out there? Are you aware of anybody doing that?

Dr. Kayla Herr: No, I'm not actually, but the places where I could see this happening, and maybe there is and I'm not aware of it, is the American Chronic Pain Foundation, because there certainly look at patient education providing resources for patients. The American Pain Society is an organization that I'm actually involved in leading the guideline and resource community and so you just gave me a good idea. One of the things that we could do is look at providing evaluation and guidance. One of the things that I'm involved in is the development of a website called geriatricpain.org. That website is not evaluating apps, but we have identified online resources for assessment and treatment of pain. We've reviewed them for quality and for evidence and so to us this is a best practice site, or if you go here, the resources that we make available and it's a free website. You can feel comfortable that they're sound and that there is some scientific evidence behind them.

Dr. Sonya Hardin: I just want to restate that, so that's www.geriatricpain.org that our providers can go to and obtain resources about how to provide better care with older adults.

Dr. Kayla Herr: It's particularly focused on long-term care environments, but a lot of the tools apply. We have assessment tools, and processes for assessment. We have resources for intervention, fast facts or one-page quick educational guides. We have management guides that address a lot of different pain problems like low back pain and work the clinician through how to assess and treat that. Quality improvement resources, so again looking at the process of pain assessment and treatment in an organization and how you can facilitate that. All the tools are downloadable. You can print them out and use them in your organization. So tried to make it a nice user-friendly site.

Dr. Sonya Hardin: I hope that everyone who's listening today will have the opportunity to go to this website and again, it's www.geriatricpain.org. With that I'm going to close and thank Dr. Herr for joining us today and we've enjoyed having this conversation here in the College of Nursing. Thank you.

Dr. Kayla Herr: Thank you for having me.