

## **Expert opinion: Muscle, joint and back pain**

### **It's time for pharmacies to think bones and joints.**



*Professor Anthony Woolf, Chairman of the Bone and Joint Decade (2010-20) International Coordinating Council (ICC) believes that pharmacies are ideally placed to take a more proactive bone and joint health.*

#### **What is the Bone and Joint Decade?**

The Bone and Joint Decade is a global alliance for musculoskeletal health. It is the only organisation that brings together all stakeholders in musculoskeletal conditions to work with national, regional and global levels. Launched in 2000, and remanded in 2010, the Bone and Joint Decade gains its strength from its global reach – it brings together patient, professional organisations in over 60 countries and it is endorsed by the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO).

#### **What is the Bone and Joint Decade's vision?**

The Bone and Joint Decade is working to create a world where musculoskeletal health is a priority. The alliance is looking to develop an environment where the prevention, treatment musculoskeletal conditions are of a high standard and are consistently accessible to people with, caring for, or at risk of developing a musculoskeletal condition. Through workstreams partnership working, and public and patient education, the Bone and Joint Decade aims to create a global environment where the prevention and treatment of musculoskeletal conditions leading health concern in the minds, actions and funding priorities of policymakers, health providers and the public.

#### **Why is the work of the Bone and Joint Decade so important?**

Musculoskeletal conditions are the most common cause of long-term disability and pain. They affect one in four adults. The common musculoskeletal conditions include:

- Back and neck pain and other spinal disorders (accounting for almost one in two musculoskeletal consultations)
- Osteoarthritis
- Inflammatory arthritis (principally, rheumatoid arthritis)
- Crystal arthritis (such as gout)
- Osteoporosis and fragility fractures
- Musculoskeletal injuries (such as occupational and sports injuries and road traffic trauma).

Globally, the number of people suffering from musculoskeletal conditions has increased by 25% over the past decade. This is expected to continue increasing with the ageing of our global obesity epidemic continues, as more people are diagnosed with musculoskeletal conditions and as more active lifestyles demand treatments that increase mobility.

### **How does improved management of musculoskeletal problems fit with current global health policy?**

Musculoskeletal health makes an important contribution to a number of health policy objectives; it keeps people working for longer and more independently of State support, it allows independence for longer or sooner after hospitalisation and it encourages an active healthy lifestyle.

It is also an area that allows people to self-care very effectively, thus reducing reliance on health services. Many musculoskeletal conditions do not require medical attention and can be managed using simple analgesics such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which are widely available through pharmacies. Lack of education both among healthcare professionals however, has led to a tendency to accept pain and disability as areas where 'not much can be done'. As a result, global society has become deconditioned to recovery. We need to change the positive approach of 'I should be able to work'.

### **Why should an improved management of musculoskeletal problems be important to policymakers?**

Musculoskeletal conditions have the fourth greatest impact on the health of the world population, contributing 6.8% of the global disease burden (Disability Adjusted Life Years -DALYs). The second greatest cause of disability accounting for over 20% of Years Lived with Disability (YLDs).

As global health services struggle with the fiscal challenges of delivering care to an ageing population, the Bone and Joint Decade considers that policy change designed to reduce the musculoskeletal problems will make an enormous contribution to the wellbeing of individuals and society. These are high morbidity conditions that prevent people from contributing and require extensive care and support from health and social care systems. Data show that musculoskeletal problems can affect people from 20 years old.

Affordable measures to prevent and treat musculoskeletal conditions are widely available, but lack of priority and policy means that these are not available with equity across and between societies. Grasping the importance of a more active lifestyle, it is likely that demand for musculoskeletal health protection and treatment of injuries is set to rise even further. These conditions, remain commonly ignored in favour of conditions associated with high mortality such as cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

While we have achieved some improvement in understanding at the national policy level, there is still much work to be done. Without further action there will continue to be a rising number of musculoskeletal health conditions; if this demand cannot be met, then musculoskeletal conditions will become a costly disability that will affect people from an earlier age.

### **Why does the Bone and Joint Decade consider pharmacies to be an important part of this work?**

Pharmacies are often the first point of contact for people with a musculoskeletal condition to seek treatment. With expertise in wellbeing, pharmacy staff can have a key role in disseminating positive messages about the prevention of and available treatment options for musculoskeletal conditions and associated pain.

In terms of prevention, pharmacy staff are in the ideal position to extend public health thinking and education to include bones and joints, helping people to think not just about their health but also about the importance of bone and joint health as an enabler of a healthier lifestyle. They can encourage weight loss and good diet for bone and joint health.

Pharmacy staff are also in an excellent position to provide early treatment interventions and discourage people from becoming resigned to living with bone and joint pain. With all available through pharmacies, there is every opportunity for people with bone and joint health problems to continue working and living independently into older age. We just need to tell their bodies and for pharmacies to help them hear.

### **How can pharmacy improve its management of musculoskeletal conditions?**

Pharmacies are in an excellent position to de-medicalise bone and joint health and encourage people to self-care where appropriate. As the first port of call, pharmacy assistants have a key role to play in helping people to understand that there is nothing 'serious' going on. They can demonstrate that there is much people can do to keep active, which will reduce their risk of developing longer-term problems.

Pharmacy staff can be very cautious about their product recommendations and can fail to appreciate that, while there is a potential risk of harm particularly with pain treatments, there is also a definite benefit.

Pharmacy staff need to take a more positive view of helping people to achieve pain control.

Providing access to simple but effective treatments is a key way to help people with pain to regain mobility. In pharmacies there is a good portfolio of effective OTC analgesics, particularly NSAIDs, which can be recommended as a way of getting people moving and back to doing what they want to do. NSAIDs can be recommended as an early intervention in inflammatory conditions such as low back pain. Pharmacies can also recommend OTC PPIs to achieve gastric protection, in accordance with NICE guidelines (on low back pain).