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PAIN AMONG CANCER PATIENTS IN THE HOME SETTING; A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY. K Dorrepaal, F van Dam, The Netherlands Cancer Institute.

The management of pain is one of the major problems associated with the care and treatment of cancer patients. Whilst previous literature has focused primarily on the pain experience among hospitalized cancer patients, relatively little is known about the nature and consequences of pain in patients in the home setting. The need for increased understanding of the role of pain among non-hospitalized cancer patients is under-scored by the trend toward shorter hospital stay in the Netherlands and more frequent reliance on poli-clinical care.

During a one year period, approximately 1000 patients of the Netherlands Cancer Institute were screened for pain symptoms. Excluded were patients with a life expectancy of less than 2 months. Sixteen percent of the screened patients reported being in pain for at least six weeks. These patients were interviewed in their homes and were followed up by telephone contacts. Pain intensity was measured on a scale from 0 to 10. The mean pain intensity for the entire sample over the various measurement points was 4.5. Pain intensity increased over time in 14% of the cases, decreased in 21%, remained stable in 32% and fluctuated in 32%. Forty two percent of the patients had been in pain for more than 2 years.

The patients' general practitioners were also interviewed, regarding both the treatment of the sample patients, as well as terminal cancer patients within their clinical practice. In 40% of cases, G.P.s were unaware of the fact that their ambulatory patient had pain symptoms.

The G.P.s encountered problems in finding an effective analgesic therapy for their terminal cancer patients. Difficulties were also encountered with side effects of opioids and the psychological problems of patients.