

Pain education: The importance of being humorous.

After 10 years as (Co-) Editor-in-Chief of Pain and Rehabilitation, the time has come for me to step aside. It has been a great privilege to continue the journal started by the Great Louis Gifford and his equally wonderful wife Philippa. It has been a joy to work with an enthusiastic and hardworking editorial team and I would like to thank them for all their support over the years. In my final editorial, I would like to discuss my primary area of interest – Pain Science Education (Moseley & Butler, 2003). This form of education has been delivered to multiple consumers over the past 20 years, adults and children with pain in a clinical setting, health care professionals, and more recently to the general public as part of public health initiatives which seek reconceptualisation of pain at a public health level such as the Pain Revolution in Australia led by Professor Lorimer Moseley (www.painrevolution.com) and Flippin' Pain in the UK for which I am the community pain champion (www.flippinpain.co.uk). Flippin Pain was/is heavily influenced by Pain Revolution and indeed Professor Moseley has been heavily involved in its development.

I would like to focus upon Flippin' Pain and the way the educational content is delivered – in particular the use of humour. Delivering the content in a humorous way has become a key component of the campaign, and I would like to explain why. Chronic pain is a serious topic, it can have a profound negative impact upon literally billions of people affecting 25% of the world's population (Zimmer et al. 2022) and being the largest global contributor of years lived with disability (Rice et al. 2016). Thus, it is no laughing matter. As such there is a risk when using humour to talk about pain. There is the risk that people may think we are making light of the topic or the suffering that many experience. However, this is the last thing we wish to do. So why take this risk?

Well, there are a number of reasons why we use humour. Firstly, there is a lot of information about pain floating around various media and as such it is important to try and stand out from the crowd and initially engage people. Humour can be a useful way of doing this. Furthermore, humour can be useful to keep people engaged within an educational setting (Masek et al. 2019). This would be useful in itself, but there is

more to it than that. Humour can help people to learn and retain information (Sambrani et al. 2014) – to me this is key. The literature, as is often the case, does not appear to be unanimous and introducing humour does not automatically improve learning and there are sociocultural issues that need to be navigated – what one group/community consider humorous may not be the same as another (Yue et al. 2016) - but it does appear that the right kind of humour, humour that is integrated and intrinsically related to the content can be beneficial. A nice study which demonstrates this investigated the effect of adding humour to pre-recorded research methods lectures (Garner, 2006) – one of the jokes was as follows:

A planned escape by one of two prisoners in a desert jail was used. The story finds one prisoner trying to escape after unsuccessfully persuading the other to go with him, only learning—after breaking out—that escape was futile as there was sand in every direction for hundreds of miles. After capture and return to the cell, the prisoner relates the story of his failed attempted escape. The other prisoner shares that he knew about the desert as he had tried to escape a few years earlier. Incredulous the first prisoner exclaimed “You knew! Why didn’t you tell me?”. Whereupon the other remarks “Silly man, you should know that no one reports negative results”.

This joke had everything it was not just funny, (at least I thought it was funny) but it was intrinsically linked to the learning outcomes – to drive home the subject matter key message of publishing all results both positive and negative as both are important within the literature base. The key is to identify key pain education learning outcomes and come up with/find jokes that make the same point in a memorable way. There is much we can learn from the learning and teaching literature about how best to deliver pain education to consumers – humour is a perfect example of this. As Garner (2006) cleverly puts it – you can turn a ha-ha moment in to an aha moment.

References

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