

## Roundtable Discussion on Treating Chronic Pain

Physical therapy professionals discuss the technology, modalities, and devices available for the treatment and management of chronic pain

By Cassandra Perez

**P**hysical Therapy Products recently hosted a roundtable panel discussion focused on the topic of chronic pain treatment and management. Participants addressed questions about a variety of topics, including the different therapeutic modalities used to treat chronic pain, the devices utilized for pain management, and products that provide a favorable return on investment.

The participants featured in this roundtable include: Ziad Dahdul, PT, DPT, Precision Rehabilitation, Long Beach, Calif; Christine King, PT, DPT, Women's Health program director at Mariners Physical Therapy and Sports Medicine, Santa Ana, Calif; and Nicholas Austin, PT, DPT, OCS, CSCS, managing partner, APEX Physical Therapy, LaGrange, Ky.

### **Physical Therapy Products (PTP): What therapeutic modalities do you use for the treatment of chronic pain?**

**Ziad Dahdul, PT, DPT:** The most commonly used modalities at our facility in treating chronic pain are electrical stimulation, laser therapy, cryotherapy, and thermotherapy. In addition to these modalities, we also utilize acupuncture and massage therapy, as both play significant roles in the management of chronic pain. Each of these modalities can be applied to numerous body regions in a safe and easy manner, and can be done both in the clinic and at home. Also, these modalities can be used for all types of pain regardless of the chronicity of the patient's symptoms.

**Christine King, PT, DPT:** In our practice, we use a combination of moist heat, cold pack, electrical stimulation, and ultrasound for treatment of chronic pain. It depends on the location of pain and the nature of what is causing the pain. If it is an issue due to scar tissue or chronic tightness, we use heat therapies with continuous ultrasound. If it is a chronic inflammation issue, we stick to cold therapies and pulsed ultrasound. There are several manufacturers that provide cold therapy products, including Battle Creek Equipment, Battle Creek, Mich, which offers the Ice IT! Cold Comfort line.

**Nicholas Austin, PT, DPT, OCS, CSCS:** We have a full assortment of modalities we consider when treating a patient, and we will base our modality choice on many patient factors. Consideration will be given to patient lifestyle, work requirements, goals, and, tolerance of certain positions—and, of course, functional status. In our clinics, we have employed the use of electrical stimulation, including pre-modulated, interferential, and TENS. We do intermittently use topical analgesics, based on the patient's tolerance for these and skin condition. Use of mechanical traction is shown to be effective for



Ziad Dahdul, PT, DPT



Christine King, PT, DPT



Nicholas Austin, PT, DPT, OCS, CSCS

several types of spinal conditions. Our newest, and one of our most effective, treatment choices for chronic pain seems to be functional trigger point dry needling.

### **PTP: What devices or products for pain management are used the most at your clinic?**

**Dahdul:** The most commonly used product at our facility is the H-Wave electrical stimulation unit, from Huntington Beach, Calif-based Electronic Waveform Lab Inc. This modality is indicated with impairments such as muscle spasm, swelling, joint inflammation, joint stiffness, muscle atrophy, and, most commonly, chronic pain. We frequently use the TENS setting for chronic pain, which blocks pain receptors from sensing pain in order to allow the individual to function for periods of time without their normal, typical pain.

**King:** Moist heat packs, cold packs, electrical stimulation machines, and ultrasound machines. Also, we recently added a laser to our practice, the MBM 1010, from National Medical Alliance, that has been very well-received.

**Austin:** Our most-used products are the Seirin acupuncture needle to perform functional dry needling. We will additionally combine this with use of the Pointer Excel II handheld TENS and point locator to increase the effectiveness of the dry needling of the trigger point. Also, as mentioned earlier, we are utilizing electrical stimulation machines, and at this time I favor my Dynatronics (Salt Lake City) Dynatron 706.

### **PTP: Which pain management products give you the best return on investment? Why?**

**Dahdul:** In my opinion, the device that provides the best return on investment is an electrical stimulation unit. When purchasing a

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## Chronic Pain

multipurpose unit, it allows you to utilize this modality on a wide range of patient populations while addressing needs all across the spectrum. In our case, the versatility of this type of electrical stimulation unit gives our clinicians a multitude of treatment options that can be used on appropriate clients in both the orthopedic and neurologic patient populations.

**King:** It's difficult to definitively answer this question because not all health insurance companies pay for modalities, but we still utilize them regardless of reimbursement if it may help with symptom management. Most insurance companies still pay for electrical stimulation, so that probably yields the best ROI. Few, if any, insurance companies will pay for just hot/cold therapies.

**Austin:** At this time, it seems the dry needling techniques are providing the best return on investment (training, needles, equipment), as they are driving improved outcomes for clients, better patient compliance, and increased consumer self-referral.

### PTP: What new technology or product for treating chronic pain has attracted your interest?

**Dahdul:** We've been using the Vectra Genesis Laser Therapy System from The Chattanooga Group, Vista, Calif. Laser therapy (in addition to cold laser therapy) has been gaining in popularity over the last decade and continues to gain traction when dealing with chronic tendinopathies in addition to muscle injuries. However, there are some indications for laser ther-

## Product Resources

The following companies offer products for the treatment of chronic pain:

**ActivaTek**  
www.activatetekinc.com

**ActiveWrap**  
www.activewrap.com

**Adroit Medical Systems**  
www.adroitmedical.com

**Amrex-Zetron Inc**  
www.amrexusa.com

**Battle Creek Equipment**  
www.battlecreekequipment.com

**Chattanooga, a DJO Global Company**  
www.international.chattgroup.com

**China Gel**  
www.chinagel.com

**Dynatronics**  
www.dynatronics.com

**Flexall/Ari-Med Pharmaceuticals**  
www.ari-med.com

**Gebauer Company**  
www.gebauer.com

**LiteCure Medical**  
www.litecure.com

**Mettler Electronics**  
www.mettlerelectronics.com

**Multi Radiance Medical**  
www.multiradiance.com

**OPTP**  
www.optp.com

**Rich-Mar**  
www.richmarweb.com

**Sombra Professional Therapy Products**  
www.sombrausa.com

**Sore No More**  
www.sorenomore.com

**Southwest Technologies Inc**  
www.elastogel.com

**Topical Biomedics**  
www.topicalbiomedics.com

**Whitehall Manufacturing**  
www.whitehallmfg.com

**Zimmer MedizinSystems**  
www.zimmerusa.com

apy in the chronic pain population, and I'm curious to see if enough scientific evidence presents itself to make laser therapy a go-to for chronic pain management.

**King:** As I mentioned earlier, the MBM 1010 laser we recently added to our practice. It's been very helpful for the treatment of chronic inflammatory issues such as biceps tendinitis, trochanteric bursitis, etc.

**Austin:** Recently, I have been most interested in the use of functional trigger point dry needling followed by the proper corrective exercises to manage and mitigate chronic pain. Therapeutic taping techniques interest me as well for the chronic pain patient population. Additionally, the use of proper cardiovascular exercise prescription and other conditioning/strengthening options should not be underestimated to help reduce chronic pain.

**PTP:** What portion of the services you provide to manage chronic pain are cash pay? Are you taking any steps to increase cash-pay pain-management services?

**Dahdul:** The majority of our services to manage chronic pain are insurance based, as cash pay clients make up approximately less than 10% of the chronic pain population. Because scientific evidence exists to prove the efficacy of modalities such as electrical stimulation and cryotherapy, the need to pay cash for these services is not there as insurance will usually cover these services. An increase in cash pay services will become more common as changes in our health care system unfold. This decrease in reimbursement will also make prevention of pain more common, leading to people being proactive in utilizing modalities before their pain becomes unmanageable.

**King:** Our practice doesn't necessarily function on a partial cash pay basis. Most patients elect to exhaust their insurance benefits before moving to cash pay altogether. Each treatment session is sort of "all or nothing." If we really feel a patient would benefit from ultrasound, we do the procedure and bill for it regardless of whether we will be reimbursed. Our cash rates are

also a flat rate inclusive of manual therapy, therapeutic exercise, and modalities.

**Austin:** A small but growing amount of our services are cash pay, with a majority being reimbursement from insurers. Trigger point dry needling has been an option to increase cash services and offer this manual therapy service outside of the typical parameters of insurances, and we are seeing increasing demand for this cash pay service. We are also offering cash pay therapeutic massage, and this is 100% cash pay for our clinics. We plan to push forward with further dry needling and massage services this year and sense a large growth opportunity in this area. **PTP**

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