National Expert to Lead New Stanford Headache Clinic

Often chronic condition affects 60 million Americans and costs $30 billion annually in lost productivity

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A nationally-renowned leader in headache care has arrived at Stanford Hospital & Clinics to direct its first headache clinic, a multidisciplinary care program designed to integrate the latest thinking in diagnosis and therapy for this very common and often disabling disorder.

"Only recently has headache been considered a serious issue," said Rob Cowan, MD. "No major West Coast academic medical center has such a program. Stanford is bringing its tremendous resources to a problem that affects 60 million Americans and costs the economy $30 billion a year in lost productivity."

The Stanford Headache Clinic will open on July 28 and is currently accepting appointments at 650.723.6469.

At the clinic, patients will have the services of physicians and nurses who have specialized in headache care, and a nutritionist, physical therapist, psychologist and sleep specialist who all understand the complexity of headache pain and how difficult it can be to manage.

In many cases, patients have searched for help without result, Cowan said. "You'll go to an emergency room; it's maybe the third or fourth time you've been in, you're labeled a drug seeker; you'll be given a narcotic, which isn't really effective. It's a horrible situation."

Cowan will be joined by Meredith Barad, MD. "Headache management has really improved over the last decade," said Barad, a Headache Clinic neurologist with additional training in a pain management fellowship. "That's a rare and value skill set for headache care," Cowan said.

Barad's special interest is in medication overuse headaches and multidisciplinary treatment. "Headache management has really improved over the last decade," Barad said. "We are no longer throwing opiates at the pain; studies show they don't work."

What is effective, Cowan said, and what Stanford will offer, are "physical therapists who understand that people with migraines are sensitive to touch, psychologists who understand that a migraine can be a physical manifestation of..."
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stress, nutritionists who understand that it's not just what you eat, but when you eat it, and sleep experts who recognize more than sleep apnea.”

Migraine is a very complex condition that requires complex care, he said. “We don’t have a cure, so the goal is to manage it as a chronic condition. It can become a footnote or it can ruin your life.”

The Stanford Headache Clinic’s treatment approach integrates medical, physical, psychological and complementary medicine. It focuses on prevention, lifestyle changes, physical therapy, stress management, nutritional counseling and planning for immediate response with appropriate medication when a headache occurs. It will also encourage consultations for craniosacral work, massage and yoga with Stanford’s Center for Integrative Medicine. Patients will also be asked to keep headache diaries to help pinpoint what triggers their pain.

“When research has proven that complex painful conditions, like headache, are best treated with an integrated team,” said Sean Mackey, MD, PhD, Chief of Stanford’s Pain Management Division. “That’s why I am so excited to have Dr. Cowan join Stanford. We can combine the expertise of a world-class headache specialist with that of the team at the Stanford Pain Management Center. We can offer state of the art resources to improve the lives of our patients.”

When Stanford launched a national search for a headache neurologist to direct the clinic, Cowan quickly emerged as an exceptional candidate. “I was impressed with Dr. Cowan’s very modern, multidisciplinary approach, something that takes into account what we’ve learned about the mechanisms of headache. Dr. Cowan also met our goal of a headache neurologist who could integrate well with the overall Stanford Pain Management Center, led by Dr. Mackey,” said Frank Longo, MD, PhD, chairman of Stanford’s Department of Neurology and Neurological Sciences. “We are thrilled to have him. Stanford has never had a dedicated headache program; we clearly needed one--and we wanted it to be the best.”

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Cowan chairs the section on complementary and alternative medicine for the American Headache Society and is vice president of the Headache Cooperative of the Pacific. He is board certified in psychiatry, neurology and pain medicine; he earned a subspecialty board certification in headache medicine. He is the author of more than 50 journal articles, a best-selling book on headache and neurology textbook chapters. He also lectures internationally.

The Headache Clinic represents another step toward the integration of pain care as an important element in patient care. A limitation of many headache clinics is their lack of integration within overall multidisciplinary pain programs such as Stanford’s Pain Management Center, Cowan said. The hospital recently launched a special gastrointestinal pain program.

Stanford will also be adding a fellowship in headache, a rarity. Most medical training does not include substantive teaching about migraine and other forms of chronic headache, Longo said. “That’s especially remarkable, proportionately--it’s one of the most common chief complaints in medicine, and might be the most common in the neurosciences. Unless one has specialized training, it’s a very intimidating area.”

About Stanford Hospital & Clinics

Stanford Hospital & Clinics is known worldwide for advanced treatment of complex disorders in areas such as cardiovascular care, cancer treatment, neurosciences, surgery, and organ transplants. Consistently ranked among the top institutions in the U.S. News & World Report annual list of “America’s Best Hospitals,” Stanford Hospital & Clinics is internationally recognized for translating medical breakthroughs into the care of patients. It is part of the Stanford University Medical Center, along with the Stanford University School of Medicine and Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital at Stanford. For more information, visit http://stanfordmedicine.org.