Pain characteristics of older residents in Iranian nursing homes

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Abstract
Background: Pain is a common complaint among the aging population, particularly among the older residents of nursing homes.
Aims: The main aim of the study was to examine the pain characteristics among older residents of nursing homes in Tehran, Iran.
Methods: It was a cross-sectional study. The sample consisted of 394 older adults admitted to the Tehran nursing homes. To gather the required data, Brief Pain Inventory and Abbreviated Mental Test score were used.
Results: 51% of the female and 26% of the male participants suffered from pain. Lower extremity and lower part of back were the most frequently affected. Pain interfered with general activity (p<0.001), mood (p=0.016), walking (p<0.001), normal work (p<0.001), relations with others (p=0.043), sleeping (p=0.002) and enjoyment of life (p=0.019) of the older residents and these effects were more prominent in female sex. Factors such as age, gender and schooling were of significant relationships with pain (p<0.001) and its intensity (p<0.001).
Conclusions: Chronic pain is common among older residents of nursing homes and deteriorates their quality of life. This study reconfirms the previously mentioned importance of using effective pain evaluation and pain management strategies in nursing homes.
Keywords: Pain assessment, older adults, nursing home, pain management, Iran

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Introduction

Pain is a common complaint among the aging population, particularly among the older residents of nursing homes (1–3); it is mostly due to the increasing prevalence of age-related disorders, such as arthritis, osteoporosis, and peripheral vascular diseases (4), which are mostly progressive. Usually the resultant pain is persisting due to the degenerative nature of these conditions. Pain can lead to mobility decline, role change, and psychological disturbance. Pain resulting from acute or chronic conditions is associated with decreases in physical and social functions, activities of daily living (ADL) and quality of life, and it is seen as a key indicator of physical limitations (5–7). Older people often do not actively report pain, perhaps because of the stigma associated with it or because of their own forbearance/stoicism (8). Undetected and untreated pain is still common among nursing home residents, and persists despite pain management quality indicators (9).

With the gains in life expectancy during the 20th century, the number of people aged 65 and older has increased and by the middle of the 21st century, those aged 60 and above will make up 22% of the world’s population (10). The increase in the aging population is accompanied by greater demand for long-term healthcare services. Sandberg et al. reported that more than 40% of European older adults aged 65 or above will spend some time of their life in a nursing home (11). It has been estimated that 45% to 80% of nursing home residents suffer from and report persistent pain, making it one of the most commonly reported symptoms in long-term care facilities (12–14). Recent evidence in the Islamic Republic of Iran revealed that the majority of older adults reported knee and back pain (more than 50%) and this was regardless of the chronicity, time, and the mode of reactions they aroused in the participants (15).

The aging population in the Islamic Republic of Iran has increased in the last few decades; more than six million people are aged 60 and over (9.3% of total population) (16). Long-term care of elders is still mostly family-based and residents of nursing homes usually are the most medically and socially vulnerable. Recently, an ascending trend in the number, capacity and spread of nursing homes in the country has occurred, which is indicative of the necessity of paying more attention to them (17). However, the population using nursing home services in the Islamic Republic of Iran is at variance with their counterparts in Western societies. In Iranian culture, caring for older individuals is the duty of the family, and families are considered the main source of support. Iranian nursing home residents are mostly impoverished and homeless people, stricken by multiple physical and psycho-social problems, with no family members available. Such nursing homes offer help with custodial and bathing, dressing and eating, as well as skilled care given by registered nurses including medical monitoring and treatments (18).

The high prevalence of pain and its impact on older adults’ lives makes it an important public health issue (19). Assessment of pain, especially in nursing homes, is often problematic (20). However, in managing pain, it is important to provide an individually tailored care for each resident, which depends considerably on careful pain assessment (21). Tse et al. advised all nurses to improve their skills in assessing and managing pain of older people in order to decrease their suffering, frailty and
psychological distress (22). Therefore, improving pain assessment and management should be considered as a high priority for healthcare providers (23,24). Thematic analysis by Harmon et al. identified that pain relief and care requires inclusion of the older person in the provision of care (25).

It is thought that little research has been done on pain among nursing home residents in the Islamic Republic of Iran. We found just one study by Asghari et al. which revealed that 72.8\% of the residents of nursing homes in Tehran had some kind of pain and 66.7\% reported persistent pain (i.e., the existence of pain every day or almost every day) (26). It seems that despite the high prevalence of pain among nursing home residents, this topic still has not been adequately explored in and somehow neglected by both clinicians and researchers. However, experience of pain could be modified by social and cultural factors (27), therefore it is necessary to look at the contexts if we intend to gain a deeper knowledge into pain characteristics of a specific population. Thus, the present study was implemented with the aim to examine the pain characteristics of older people residing in the nursing homes of Tehran.

Methods
Design and participants

In this cross-sectional study, 13 nursing homes (total 31) were approached through cluster sampling method and their residents were invited to participate in the study. To select nursing homes, Tehran was divided into five regions including north (three homes), south (two homes), east (two homes), west (three homes), and central (three homes), and part based on official socioeconomic status index. The first two nursing homes were selected from each region randomly, and if they could not fill up their share in the sample, another one randomly selected. The final sample consisted of 394 older adults out of 1500 residents of Tehran nursing homes in 2012. Mean age of the 394 participants was 74.3 (SD: 10.8) years, and 253 (59.6\%) were female.

Approval for the study was granted by the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee of the University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Deputy of Research. Participants were informed about the aim and procedure of this study, and written consent was obtained from all the participants. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that all information related to them would remain confidential. Inclusion criteria for the participants included age being 60 years or older, ability to communicate in Persian and orientation to time and place, living in nursing homes for at least a month (decreasing the impact of stressful life event of transition to nursing home), and no significant cognitive impairment (AMTs ≥ 7) (28). After selecting participants, due to the high frequency of low literacy and illiteracy among them, the study questionnaires were addressed to the participants by trained research assistants and their responses taken.
**Data collection**

A demographic information form was completed by the participants and included questions about age, gender and schooling. The Brief Pain Inventory (BPI) was used to gather the data; it evaluates the multidimensional nature of pain including pain sites, pain intensity and pain interference with life activities during the period of a week (29). BPI consists of three parts; first, it includes pictures representing back and front body outlines which are presented to participants to mark their area of pain on them, and sequentially numbering the different pain sites. Second, it includes four single-item measures of pain intensity: worst pain, least pain, average pain, and current pain. Each item is rated from 0 (“no pain”) to 10 (“the worst pain I can imagine”). The average of these four items represents patients’ overall pain intensity. Third, it includes seven items that assess the extent to which pain interferes with general activity, mood, walking, normal work, relations with others, sleeping, and enjoyment of life. Each item is rated on a 0–10 scale (30). The BPI is validated for use in older adults (31) and Mirzamani et al. showed that the BPI is a valid and reliable tool in the Iranian population (32).

Significant cognitive impairment among the study participants, interfering with informed consent, was evaluated using the Abbreviated Mental Test score (AMTs) – a brief 10-item survey. Each question answered correctly scored one point and a score of 7 or less suggested cognitive impairment at the time of testing. AMTs was introduced by Hodkinson in 1972 (33). It is a rapid tool for assessing cognitive function and especially useful in determining the risk of dementia in vulnerable older patients (34). This instrument has previously been validated in Iranian elderly (35,36).

**Data analysis**

Descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using the SPSS Version 16.0 (Chicago, SPSS Inc.). The Mann-Whitney U, Spearman’s Rho Correlations and Chi-Square ($\chi^2$) tests were used to measure the relationships between variables. The level of statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

**Results**

Based on the results, 244 (62%) had no formal education, 75 (19%) were at elementary, 49 (12.4%) at high school and 26 (6.6%) at academic levels. Most of the subject had AMTs = 10 (n = 137, 34.8%) and the mean of AMT score was 8.75 (SD: 1.24). Figure 1 clearly shows the areas of pain among the older adults. Lower extremities on front and lower part of trunk at back (lower back) were the most frequently reported as pain sites.

The mean overall pain intensity in elders with pain was as follows: worst pain (5.03 ± 3.46), least pain (1.1 ± 1.7), average pain (2.9 ± 2.3) and current pain (1.68 ± 2.5). Table 1 presents pain intensity in elderly nursing home residents. Mean time of pain was 57.29 months (SD: 46.76) and as Table 2 illustrates, most of the residents suffered from pain for more than 60 months (n = 137, 34.8%). The findings also highlighted the participants applied self-care strategies in managing their
pain. Most of the participants took prescribed medications (n = 287, 72.8%), used ointments (n = 62, 15.7%), massage (n = 62, 15.7%), hot pack (n = 1, 0.3%) and others procedures (n = 8, 2%) to relieve their pain. 45.2% used one self-care strategy (n = 178), 22.8% (n = 90) two strategies, and 8.9% (n = 35) three strategies to manage pain; 91 participants (23.1%) reported as unspecified.

The study indicated that 51% of the female and 26% of male participants suffered from pain. Table 3 shows that pain significantly interfered with general activity, mood, walking, normal work (includes both work outside the home and housework), relations with others, sleeping, and enjoyment of life in older residents and these effects were more prominent in females. Table 4 indicates that factors such as age, gender and schooling are significantly associated with pain and its intensity.

Discussion

The present study set out to determine pain characteristics in older residents of nursing homes in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The prevalence of pain in our sample was within the range found in some previous studies (37–39). In a literature review of pain prevalence among older residents of nursing homes, 27 studies were conducted between 1990 and 2009, and Takai et al. (4) found a wide prevalence rate between 3.7% and 79.5%, depending on research data sources used to detect pain. These results are consistent with those presented by Lukas et al. (3) in Services and Health for Elderly in Long TERm care (SHELTER) study, which reported pain prevalence varied significantly among countries, ranging from 19.8% in Israel to 73.0% in Finland. Our finding provides evidence that the largest proportion of this sample suffered from severe pain, and they needed more effort on behalf of the care providers in relieving pain. Moreover, the participants reported multiple sites of pain, with some similarity to previous findings (15,40,41). Consistent with the findings by Lukas et al. (3, 12), and Zwakhalen et al. (13), we also found that pain prevalence appears to be demonstrably higher among females than males.

This study showed that older residents, compared with younger ones, were more likely to report suffering pain. The result is in line with the study by Leong (42), yet another study found that residents with chronic pain were younger than those without pain (43), while other studies showed no significant associations between pain and the residents’ age (44,45). These conflicting results could be due to differences in sample size or methods used in the studies. Therefore, it seems that further studies are required to explore the subject.

The results of this investigation showed that there is a significant relationship between pain and schooling, which is in line with SAGE, a large study investigating risk factors associated with low back pain in older adults living in lower/middle income countries (46), although some other studies in more high-income countries such as Spain (47) and the United States (48) had contrary results. Our findings showed that the lower extremity and lower part of back were the most frequently reported as pain sites. This finding is supported by Tse et al. (40), Mobily et al. (49) and Fries et al. (50). On the other hand, Kim et al. showed that knee pain and lower back pain are important
factors affecting quality of life in middle-aged and elderly people (51). These results are consistent with the findings of our study which revealed that pain interferes with mood, sleeping, daily activities, communication with others and overall enjoyment of life. The results of Tse et al. (52), Hairi et al. (53), and William et al. (54), also, suggested the same.

The most common strategy used by our participants for controlling pain was prescribed drugs and ointments. This is in line with the findings of Gong et al. that reported prescribed and over-the-counter medicines as the most often used strategies by middle-aged and older adults with arthritis (55). A nursing ethnography by Robinson showed that natural remedies, creams and ointments seemed to be perceived as being safer than prescribed medications by older participants (56). It would appear that more research is needed to determine the reasons for not using other effective strategies to relieve pain by nursing home residents.

Conclusions
Pain is common among residents of Iranian nursing homes and it can affect important life indices such as mood, sleep, communication and activity. This study showed that pain management practices in nursing homes are inadequate and need serious revision. Health policy-makers and geriatric care strategists need to improve the training of care providers in order to manage older residents’ pain and help improve their quality of life. Variables such as age, sex and depression can affect pain severity and must be taken into account in pain assessment and management. This study reconfirms the previously mentioned importance of using effective pain evaluation and pain management strategies in nursing homes.

Implications for practice
Nursing homes personnel needs more training on pain assessment and management in order to lower the levels of pain, frailty and psychological distress among nursing home residents, and revisit pain management strategies to help their residents with the best possible option. Older people also can actively participate in their pain management through self-care training and learning how to use different available means for pain alleviation.

Limitations
We could not include residents with impaired mental functioning due to ethical considerations and due to the unavailability of their legal or health guardians. This study was implemented only in the metropolitan of Tehran, therefore our findings cannot be generalized to include the whole country and a similar nationwide study is recommended.

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**Competing interests:** None declared.

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Table 1. Distribution of pain intensity among the participants (n = 394)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pain intensity</th>
<th>Worst pain</th>
<th>Least pain</th>
<th>Average pain</th>
<th>Current pain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No pain</td>
<td>86 (21.8%)</td>
<td>223 (56.6%)</td>
<td>86 (21.8%)</td>
<td>208 (52.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>37 (9.4%)</td>
<td>36 (9.1%)</td>
<td>38 (9.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6 (1.5%)</td>
<td>75 (19.0%)</td>
<td>70 (17.8%)</td>
<td>52 (13.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>45 (11.4%)</td>
<td>42 (10.7%)</td>
<td>56 (14.2%)</td>
<td>30 (7.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>16 (4.1%)</td>
<td>5 (1.3%)</td>
<td>30 (7.6%)</td>
<td>17 (4.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>82 (20.8%)</td>
<td>2 (0.5%)</td>
<td>56 (14.2%)</td>
<td>15 (3.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>14 (3.6%)</td>
<td>1 (0.3%)</td>
<td>45 (11.4%)</td>
<td>5 (1.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>23 (5.8%)</td>
<td>4 (1.0%)</td>
<td>4 (1.0%)</td>
<td>6 (1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>46 (11.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>4 (1.0%)</td>
<td>7 (1.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>17 (4.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (0.5%)</td>
<td>5 (1.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>56 (14.2%)</td>
<td>4 (1.0%)</td>
<td>4 (1.0%)</td>
<td>9 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain as bad as you can imagine</td>
<td>3 (0.8%)</td>
<td>1 (0.3%)</td>
<td>1 (0.3%)</td>
<td>2 (0.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Duration of pain among the participants (n = 394)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period (months)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-24</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37-48</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49-60</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Pain interferences with the life of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pain interference</th>
<th>Female M</th>
<th>Female SD</th>
<th>Male M</th>
<th>Male SD</th>
<th>z</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney U</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General activity</td>
<td>7.02</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>-4.80</td>
<td>6960.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>-2.409</td>
<td>8733.0</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>6.97</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>-5.065</td>
<td>6798.0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Relation of pain and its intensity with demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Having pain</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>Pain intensity</th>
<th>Spearman’s Rho Correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>$r$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18.18</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>15.78</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling</td>
<td>19.21</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
<td>Schooling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Distribution of pain areas in the participants (N = 394)