

Global Burden of Disease: The Impact of Pain

Fiona M Blyth

University of Sydney.

Burden of disease studies are used to rank the impact of different conditions on the health of populations, and are widely used in determining priorities for resource allocation by international and national organisations. Burden of disease measures both fatal and non-fatal burden of specific conditions: premature loss of life (Years of Life Lost) and disability (Years of Life Lived with Disability). The combined impact of fatal and non-fatal burden is assessed through the summary measure of Disability-Adjusted Life Years.

The Global Burden of Disease Study, which is the most comprehensive and only international burden of disease study, has demonstrated that pain conditions – notably low back pain – are leading causes of non-fatal health burden globally, and also regionally in South East Asia. We have not yet seen the recognition of this outside the pain community, with the focus still on conditions causing premature mortality rather than disability.

The burden related to pain conditions has been increasing substantially over the last two decades, primarily due to ageing of the population. There are stark differences in the rates at which populations are ageing in different parts of the world, with accelerated rates seen in less developed countries that are less well resourced to manage this significant demographic change. Forward estimates suggest that by 2050 most of the world's older population will be in Asia.

There are many gaps in current estimates of global pain burden, leading to underestimation of burden. While a clear roadmap can be developed to address this problem, the size of the known burden suggests that the pain community needs to respond in both scientific and policy terms to reduce the current burden and minimize the size of the future burden.