PHYSICIAN BURNOUT AND PATIENT POVERTY: THE CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES OF CHRONIC PAIN CARE IN ONTARIO

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INTRODUCTION / AIM
Chronic pain is a significant health problem in many regions, including Canada. In this poster we explore the contextual challenges that primary care providers face in providing care to chronic pain patients.

METHODS
Over 40 ethnographic interviews with primary care providers in the Canadian province of Ontario. Interviews were collected as part of an institutional ethnography (IE) examining the coordination of care for chronic non-cancer pain in Ontario.

RESULTS
While literature on chronic disease management in Ontario emphasizes the frail, multimorbid elderly as the prototypical chronic disease patient, our findings suggest that the most challenging chronic pain patients are those of low socio-economic status. For these patients, extremely challenging life circumstance forecloses the possibility both of taking up the lifestyle modifications that their physicians recommend, and also of following through with treatment regiments. Rather, these patients’ most pressing needs include assistance in accessing affordable housing and social benefits.

DISCUSSION / CONCLUSIONS
Much of the assistance that these complex pain patients require falls well outside the scope of physicians’ expertise, and the high socioeconomic status of most primary care providers means that they have no personal experience upon which to draw in assisting their patients in this regard. Our findings complement existing survey data to suggest that inability to address patients’ needs combined with a poor understanding of impoverished patients’ life circumstances is frustrating for physicians, causing some to blame their patients for their continued suffering, and in comes cases to outright reject these patients. We suggest that effective chronic pain care requires better integration between primary care and social assistance, as well as an increase in social security overall. Failing to achieve this contributes to both physician burn-out and patient suffering.

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