

BY IRA P. PEDRASA, Reporter

Pain emerging *as a major health concern*

At least five million adult Filipinos are experiencing pain — pain that is chronic and could turn out to be one of the most critical health issues in the country, according to the Association of Southeast Asian Pain Societies.

"While acute pain is generally considered a symptom of injury or illness, pain that persists for long periods of time, or after an underlying injury or disease has [been cured], is no longer merely a symptom," said Henry U. Lu, association chairman and head of the Pain Control Unit of the Makati Medical Center.

Chronic pain is a disease in its own right, only it is being neglected due to lack of understanding and awareness from the public, policy makers and even health professionals.

Left unattended, the diseases would cause a "tremendous burden" on the sufferer's life. In most cases, chronic pain disturbs a person's sleep and even affects his or her mobility. Sometimes it affects attitude, lifestyle, and behavior — leading to isolation, anxiety, frustration, and depression.

Donna (not her real name), started to feel pain immediately after an operation for myoma. "When I stopped taking my analgesics for

my post-surgery, the pain came back. I thought I was just tired. The pain, however, radiated through my chest, sternum, right down through my vagina," she said.

The doctor even laughed it off, saying it was a mere "psychological thing," she said. She was later referred to a psychiatrist, then a physical therapist. "They said I was just too apprehensive of my pain," she said.

Later, she decided to wait for a pain specialist to come see her but had to wait in line because of the doctor's busy schedule. By then, the pain had paralyzed her and "even the mere touch of my hair caused me pains," she said.

Admitting that the number of pain specialists in the country are few, Mr. Lu stressed the need for doctors to be aware and recognize the symptoms of chronic pain.

In other parts of the world, chronic pain has become a major health problem. Approximately 30% of the population and one in five

adults in developed countries suffer from several types of chronic pain.

Common types of chronic pain evolve from the following: osteoarthritis which is the more prevalent form of arthritis and occurs when there is a breakdown of joint cartilage in the bones; rheumatoid arthritis which affects various body organs; and neuropathic pain which usually involves damage to the nervous system, said Dr. Ralf Baron, head of the Department of Neurological Pain Research and Therapy of the Christian Albrechts-Universität in Kiel, Germany.

Since chronic pain is also more associated with an aging population, the incidence is expected to rise in the next 20 years or so, Mr. Lu added. In the U.S., medication costs, lost working days, and compensation reach \$100 billion a year.

While there are not enough data for the Philippines, the costs of curing the disease may just be fictitious, he added. To make matters worse, Filipinos have to settle with a mere 84 kg of morphine the country imports every year. Morphine is used as a painkiller.

The five largest hospitals alone consume 15 kg while the remaining volume is distributed throughout the country. Morphine is not solely for pain symptoms, but also for surgical procedures, he noted.

"That is why the first step really is

to change the mind-set," he said. "The alleviation of chronic pain is possible with education, lifestyle modifications, and treatment plans," he said.

During the first congress of the Association of Southeast Asian Pain Societies, a multidisciplinary group of specialists across Asia-Pacific was convened to address the problem. The group, called the Regional Chronic Pain Communications Council, developed the first Asia-Pacific Declaration for Chronic Pain Relief to promote awareness and campaigns.

The declaration aims to raise awareness and elevate the profile of chronic pain as a condition in its own right; establish chronic pain as a priority health issue in the minds of governments, health care professionals and the public; and improve awareness and knowledge of chronic pain management among health care professionals to help sufferers across the Asia-Pacific region find relief.

"The declaration should bring a greater level of awareness regarding these issues. It is becoming increasingly important that we get these messages out to as many people as possible," said Dr. Alex Yeo Sow Nam, director and consultant of the Pain Management Center of the Singapore General Hospital.