Epidemiology of self-reported headache, musculoskeletal pain and use of analgesics in Sweden – a gender perspective

Chris Bingefors
Uppsala University

Headache and musculoskeletal pain are major public health problems. Substantial proportions of the general population report that they experience pain problems that affect their work, daily living and social life. Epidemiological studies have consistently shown that the prevalence of most pain conditions is higher in women than in men. For instance a population based survey in the county of Uppland, Sweden, 1995 (N=5404) [Bingefors & Isacson 2004], showed that 50.0% of the women reported suffering from one or more of the four pain complaints studied as compared to 38.0% of the men. The greatest difference was found with respect to headache where 17.6% of the women and 6.7% of the man reported this problem. The corresponding figures for the other problems were: Shoulder pain 26.3% vs 14.9%, Pain in arms/legs 17.4% vs 13.7% and Back pain 24.3% vs 20.9%. Furthermore, women reported more severe pain. Comorbidity between pain conditions and psychiatric and somatic problems was higher among women. Health-related quality of life (SF-36) differed by gender and type of pain condition. The physical dimensions of HRQoL were more affected by headache among men; psychological dimensions were more affected among women. Among both men and women, pain conditions were associated with poorer socioeconomic conditions and life-style factors but there were gender differences. Education and unemployment were important factors only among men while economical difficulties, half-time work and being married were associated with pain among women. Obesity, early disability retirement, long time sick-leave and lack of exercise were associated with pain conditions generally. Factors associated with pain conditions were unevenly distributed between genders.

Analgesics are the most commonly used non-prescription medications and some of the most commonly used prescription medications. The extent of analgesic use can be described from the viewpoints of unnecessary use, dependence and side-effects. Problems with concurrent use of multiple analgesic products have also been discussed. Epidemiological studies relying on self-reported use consistently show a gender difference, with women reporting significantly more frequent analgesic use. In the survey in Uppland described above the use of analgesics was analysed from a gender perspective. The analyses showed that 34.8 % of the women and 21.4 % of the men had used prescription and/ or over-the-counter analgesics during the two week recall period. Social structure, social status, marital status, educational level, economic situation, lifestyle, attitudes toward drugs, medication knowledge and self-care orientation were of minor importance for the difference in use between women and men. Difference in prevalence of various types of pain and ache and the degree of pain experienced were the most influential factors affecting the difference in use. However, when all factors were analysed there remained a substantial difference in use between women and men. Considering the more frequent use of analgesics among women than men women are at greater risk for adverse effects and dependency. Since the survey was carried out the sales of analgesics has increased substantially. Several more types of analgesics are now available over-the-counter.

In 2004/2005 a survey on health, quality of life and use of drugs was performed in the whole of Sweden (N =4875). Epidemiological results on factors associated with chronic pain, use of analgesics and effects on quality of life from a gender perspective will be presented at the conference.