



ANZCA
FPM

President
Australian and New Zealand
College of Anaesthetists

Dean
Faculty of Pain Medicine

11 April 2024

David Anderson, Managing Director
ABC

Via email: anderson.david@abc.net.au

Dear Mr Anderson

Four Corners program "Pain Factory"

We are writing to raise serious concerns about the Four Corners program "Pain Factory" that aired on Monday night, and a number of accompanying online articles and ABC radio interviews regarding surgical procedures for patients with chronic pain.

The Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) and its Faculty of Pain Medicine (FPM) are the foremost authorities on anaesthesia and pain medicine in Australia yet neither was approached for comment for this Four Corners episode which contained serious allegations of misusing Medicare funds.

Anaesthesia

The program alleged that anaesthetists were engaged in over-billing by overstating the time taken for surgery.

An online version of "Pain Factory" included a list of Medicare items claimed for over 100 spinal surgery cases including some involving fluoroscopy (item no 60506). Claims for anaesthesia were identified as being substantially longer than fluoroscopy, which usually takes less than one hour.

The reporter and others interviewed concluded this was inappropriate but failed to consider more likely explanations for this discrepancy, namely that the fluoroscopy item number did not represent the true length of the surgery and anaesthetic, but only the time it was required, which is nearly always less than one hour.

The data on the extra time necessary for anaesthesia for back surgery, unlike other surgeries, can also be explained by the time required to turn an anaesthetised patient prone and then supine again at the end of the surgery, which usually requires a specialised team to co-ordinate.

It is also concerning that the allegations of rorting by anaesthetists have been made based purely on billing profiles. Any investigation that results in such serious allegations should have examined all the information, including the clinical records.

It is disappointing that Four Corners did not seek any information or clarify details in the story with ANZCA or the Australian Society of Anaesthetists (ASA) who issued this message to its members the day after "Pain Factory" aired.

Pain medicine

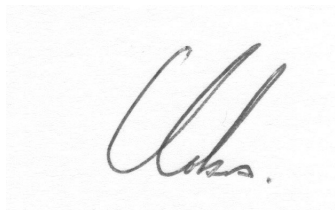
As the peak body for pain medicine in Australia, FPM (who have issued this statement) would have welcomed the opportunity to highlight the urgency of establishing a pain device implant registry and funding to develop a national model of implanted pain treatment care as discussed with the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Healthcare to protect patients.

FPM is the only organisation in Australia that provides systematic, supervised training in the use of pain device implants which should be used sparingly and only as part of a holistic multidisciplinary team approach treating patients in pain with specialists trained in such procedures.

We are therefore disappointed that the strong reputations of our members have been tarnished and our patients unnecessarily alarmed and misinformed due to incorrect allegations and a lack of balance in the "Pain Factory", which is at odds with the ABC's code of conduct.

This is particularly frustrating knowing the usually high-calibre and balanced reporting you have a reputation for producing.

Yours sincerely



Dr Chris Cokis
President



Dr Kieran Davis
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Four Corners (4Corners@abc.net.au)