

Low back pain: a major global challenge

Low back pain is a major problem throughout the world and it is getting worse—largely because of the ageing and increasing world population.¹ It affects all age groups and is generally associated with sedentary occupations, smoking, obesity, and low socioeconomic status.² Years lived with disability caused by low back pain have increased by more than 50% since 1990, especially in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs).^{1,2} Disability related to low back pain is projected to increase most in LMICs where resources are limited, access to quality health care is generally poor, and lifestyle changes and shifts towards more sedentary work for some mean the risks will only increase.

These are some of the issues highlighted in a *Lancet* Series of two papers^{2,3} and a Viewpoint⁴ on low back pain by an international group of authors, led by Rachele Buchbinder from Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. In the first paper, Jan Hartvigsen, Mark Hancock, and their colleagues² draw our attention to the complexity of the condition and the contributors to it, such as psychological, social, and biophysical factors, and especially to the problems in LMICs where health systems are not equipped to cope with the growing burden of low back pain. They discuss the challenges and causes of low back pain and make suggestions for the way forward in research.

In the second paper, Nadine Foster and colleagues³ outline recommendations for treatment and the scarcity of research into prevention of low back pain. The evidence they discuss comes almost exclusively

from high-income countries, and whether guidelines based on this evidence would be suitable for LMICs is not known. They propose solutions to inappropriate treatment, such as the use of opioids, but admit that the evidence base for them is inadequate.

The last paper is a call for action by Buchbinder and colleagues⁴ who argue that persistence of disability associated with low back pain needs to be recognised and that it cannot be separated from social and economic factors and personal and cultural beliefs about back pain. They urge global organisations such as WHO to take action to try to reduce the increasing and costly effects of disabling low back pain. A major challenge will be to stop the use of harmful practices while ensuring access to effective and affordable health care for people with low back pain.

*Stephanie Clark, Richard Horton

The Lancet, London EC2Y 5AS, UK

stephanie.clark@lancet.com

We declare no competing interests.

- 1 GBD 2016 Disease and Injury Incidence and Prevalence Collaborators. Global, regional, and national incidence, prevalence, and years lived with disability for 328 diseases and injuries for 195 countries, 1990–2016: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016. *Lancet* 2017; **390**: 1211–59.
- 2 Hartvigsen J, Hancock MJ, Kongsted A, et al. What low back pain is and why we need to pay attention. *Lancet* 2018; published online March 21. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30480-X](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30480-X).
- 3 Foster NE, Anema JR, Cherkin D, et al. Prevention and treatment of low back pain: evidence, challenges, and promising directions. *Lancet* 2018; published online March 21. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30489-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30489-6).
- 4 Buchbinder R, van Tulder M, Öberg B, et al. Low back pain: a call for action. *Lancet* 2018; published online March 21. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30488-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30488-4).



Published Online
March 21, 2018
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30725-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30725-6)
See Online/Series
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30480-X](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30480-X) and
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30489-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30489-6)
See Online/Viewpoint
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30488-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30488-4)