

MEDIA RELEASE
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Digital health technologies could help young people with musculoskeletal pain: so why aren't we using them?

With digital device usage approaching 100% in the millennial generation, recent research from Curtin University shows that digital strategies could provide an accessible intervention to help transform health service delivery and ensure quality of care for young people with chronic health conditions such as persistent musculoskeletal pain.

Persistent musculoskeletal pain affects about 1 in 4 young people. Common conditions associated with persistent musculoskeletal pain include: arthritis, fibromyalgia, low back pain, neck pain and widespread muscle and joint pain.

Research led by Professor Helen Slater and Professor Andrew Briggs at Curtin University Perth, examined the evidence for the use of mobile health (mHealth) technologies to support young people managing chronic health conditions such as persistent musculoskeletal [pain](#)¹.

They found that young Australians with persistent musculoskeletal pain want access to digital health solutions to support their self-care. More specifically, solutions that are oriented to their needs, are readily accessible, reliable and free.

According to Professor Slater “persistent musculoskeletal pain imposes a significant health and economic burden on many young Australians. The issue is that current health services designed for the specific needs of young people with musculoskeletal pain are inadequate, often inaccessible or not aligned with what is considered best practice.”

“Recognising and treating persistent pain in young people is important, because persistent pain can significantly impact every aspect of young lives, particularly young people’s mental health and their capacity to work, study and socialise.”

“Digital health solutions are a natural fit for young people, who have their mobile phones with them all the time. The use of mhealth to support self-care of chronic health conditions is supported by the evidence, yet most of our health services are still delivered using traditional face to face care models.” said Prof Slater.

“This means that many young people have trouble accessing the services they need and knowing what is reliable information. This creates care disparities, especially for young people living in rural and remote areas.”

“Young people are clear that they want a health system with improved access to digital health services,” explained Prof Slater. “mHealth can provide an efficient, scalable and sustainable solution to empower young people to better manage their pain. mHealth is not a standalone solution; we see it complementing current health services, ensuring that young people’s preferences are heard and their specific needs are met.”

Professor Slater and colleagues are now testing the use of mHealth app *iCANCOPE with pain*, developed by researchers in Canada. “The plan is to test and adapt this mHealth app for use by young Australians.”

“Digital health technologies are here: the challenge is for our health systems to be responsive, to embrace and implement digital health solutions to empower young people’s self-care.” said Professor Slater.

The briefing report about this research, [mHealth for Chronic Disease Management: Experiences of Young People and Professionals](#)¹ has just been launched.

This research involved multiple stakeholders and worked closely with young people to understand their specific needs and preferences in this area. Partner organisations included Arthritis & Osteoporosis Western Australia, Musculoskeletal Australia, WA Health and others.* It also brought together national and international research colleagues.

* Joanna Briggs Institute, University of Adelaide; Government of Western Australia; and the Department of Health and Child Health Evaluative Sciences, The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Canada.

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¹ Slater H, Campbell J, Stinson J, Burley M, Briggs AM (2018): mHealth for chronic disease management: A systematic review of experiences of young people and professionals. Melbourne; MOVE muscle, bone and joint health; and Arthritis and Osteoporosis Western Australia.

² Slater H, Jordan JE, Chua J, Schütze R, Briggs AM (2016): Young people’s experiences of living with persistent pain, their interactions with health services and their needs and preferences for pain management including digital technologies. Melbourne: Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria and Arthritis and Osteoporosis Western Australia.

Prof Helen Slater is a clinical researcher (Curtin University) with a passion for driving improvements in young people’s musculoskeletal pain care. She is recognised nationally and internationally for her work in the area of musculoskeletal pain.

About Arthritis & Osteoporosis WA

Arthritis & Osteoporosis WA is a non-profit organisation that has worked to become the leading authority on arthritis education, research and service provision over the last 40 years. Our aim is to help reduce the pain and disabling effects of arthritis, osteoporosis and related conditions.

About Musculoskeletal Australia (formerly MOVE muscle, bone & joint health)

Musculoskeletal Australia supports people with arthritis, back pain, fibromyalgia, gout, polymyalgia rheumatica and over 150 conditions that affect 6.8 million Australians. The organisation has been in existence for 50 years and provides a person-centred, self-directed approach to empower people living with these conditions through information, education and support services.

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