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Virtual Reality Research Continues to Progress at the National Institutes of Health

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The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), is among the leading funders of pain research at the NIH. By law, the NIH must issue announcements of areas of research interest. One major series of pain research funding announcements, issued by 11 Institutes and developed in cooperation with the NIH Pain Consortium, is titled *Mechanisms, Models, Measurement, and Management in Pain Research* (see http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-13-118.html).

In these announcements, the NIH states that they are interested in research on ''…non-pharmacological and novel (e.g. virtual reality) therapies for pain treatment in diverse populations such as ethnic minority groups and persons with disabilities.'' The specific mention of virtual reality (VR) is not by chance. There is a genuine understanding at the NIH of VR's potential to treat pain, and this has translated to the NIH funding a substantial amount of VR pain research. Using the NIH RePORT system (www.report.nih.gov/) to search NIH funded projects VR and pain projects, dozens of funded projects can be found, representing tens of millions of dollars in funding over the past decade.

Why such an interest at NIDA, and across the NIH, in VR to treat pain? First, there is a huge need for new pain treatments. Approximately 100 million people in the United States suffer from chronic pain,[1] and each case is somewhat different. No single pain treatment exists that is good for everyone, or even the majority of people. VR is proving itself as one viable option for reducing pain in suffering, and thus its development must be a priority.

Second, while opioids can be effective in the treatment of pain, they have a significant side effect profile, and the rates of misuse and addiction are staggering. In the United States alone, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 16,000 people die each year from a prescription opioid overdose. That exceeds deaths from cocaine and heroin overdoses combined. The last decade of research has established that VR, in a variety of situations, offers a safe and effective treatment of pain, without the possibility of drug addiction or many side effects common to opioids.

And progress has accelerated in the development of using VR for the treatment of pain. This special issue of *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, & Social Networking* is just another demonstration of how this field has developed and grown, and what a positive impact VR can have in alleviating pain. I expect advancements in this field to continue for many years to come.

Reference

1. Institute of Medicine. Relieving Pain in America: a blueprint for transforming prevention, care, education, and research. Report Brief. June 2011.

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