Media Backgrounder: 
Understanding the Impact of Chronic Pain

Prevalence of Chronic Pain across Europe
Pain is a widespread problem across Europe, with an estimated one in five adults affected by chronic non-cancer pain\(^1\) and over one-third (34%) living with severe pain.\(^1\) It is generally more common in women than men\(^2,3\) and becomes more common with increasing age.\(^2\) Chronic pain is defined as pain that persists or progresses over a long period of time (usually stated as over three months\(^4\)) and may range in intensity from mild, to moderate, to severe. Chronic pain may remain constant, or it can fluctuate, but it will be present to some degree for long periods of time.

Examples of chronic pain include back pain, cancer pain, arthritis (a condition affecting the joints and bones) and osteoarthritis (a form of arthritis where cartilage between the bones gradually wastes away, leading to bones rubbing together in the joints).

Individual Impact of Chronic Pain
Chronic pain can have a devastating effect on a patient’s quality of life. People with chronic pain experience a much poorer quality of life than the general population\(^5\) and many suffer from anxiety, depression and stress.\(^6,7,8,9\) For people who live with chronic pain, everyday activities are a struggle; approximately two-thirds of sufferers report being less able or unable to sleep and about half report difficulty with household chores because of their pain.\(^1\) Nearly one-fifth of sufferers say that pain affects their relationships with family and friends and nearly one in six feel their pain is sometimes so bad they want to die.\(^1\)

Socioeconomic Impact of Chronic Pain
Uncontrolled pain also has a significant negative socioeconomic impact. The majority of costs associated with pain arise from the indirect costs of lost productivity. Around one-third of European workers are affected by their pain, with approximately 60% being less able or unable to work outside of home. As a result, chronic pain is responsible for considerable claims for income and social support from governments.\(^10\)

The economic cost of chronic pain in Europe is not well quantified but studies have estimated the costs of specific types of pain in particular countries; in the UK back pain alone costs the economy £12.3 billion per year\(^11\) and in Sweden, the direct and indirect costs of sick leave and early retirement due to chronic pain represent 10% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP).\(^12\)

Diagnosis and Treatment
A pain diagnosis takes place following a comprehensive assessment of the patient, which will vary depending on the type of painful condition they are experiencing and whether the patient is being assessed by a doctor or a specialist at a pain clinic. The doctor may use a number of tests and techniques to try to understand the symptoms, how they are affecting the patient and what their possible cause might be. Pain assessment may include the use of pain scales and questionnaires, combined with a physical examination. As well as assessing the pain itself, the doctor may occasionally conduct additional tests to determine the underlying cause of the pain. These may include blood tests, X-rays, CT scan, an MRI scan and a nerve conduction study.
According to the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), there is substantial evidence for the effectiveness of multidisciplinary treatment for chronic pain problems. IASP recommends that multidisciplinary pain centres should offer patients access to staff from a variety of medical and health care disciplines, including physicians, nurses, mental health professionals and physical therapists. Patient assessment and treatment should be multidisciplinary to ensure appropriate management of all biomedical and psychological aspects of pain problems. It is also recommended that data should be regularly collected on the characteristics and outcomes of the patients being treated.\(^1\)

The overall goal of treating chronic pain is to enable people with pain to live full and rewarding lives in the face of chronic illness. There are a variety of treatment options for people with chronic pain including non-pharmacological treatments, such as acupuncture and transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) and pharmacological treatments. As the level of pain increases, different types of medication or doses can be used. Pharmacological treatments include:

- Over-the-counter (OTC) pain relief medications, such as paracetamol and some non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), e.g. ibuprofen
- Anti-convulsants and anti-depressants
- Opioid pain relief medications e.g. codeine, morphine, oxycodone, buprenorphine, fentanyl

References