



## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## The role and impact of the headache nurse specialist

### *Baş ağrısı hemşiresinin rolü ve önemi*

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To the Editor,

Headache is one of the most common neurological complaints and accounts for 2–5% of the consultations in primary care.<sup>[1]</sup> There are more than 200 varieties of headache disorders and the diagnosis and optimal treatment of these headache types can be highly challenging. Lately, international guidelines for the treatment of headache disorders have been reported and tertiary referral headache clinics have successfully provided an accurate diagnosis and effective treatment of headache by professional expertise aiming to make an immense difference to the patient. Although patients with headache disorders can be referred to a number of tertiary care headache outpatient clinics in Turkey, it is understood that there are no standardized care units that are regularly overseen by organizations such as neurology and pain societies. In the current article, we aim to emphasize the pivotal role of the specialist headache nurse whose scope of work is clearly defined and detailed in western medical practice within tertiary care.

In fact, multidisciplinary care is increasingly recognized as an efficient mode to deliver headache services.<sup>[2]</sup> Within tertiary care, the specialist headache nurse has a crucial role. The headache nurse's work is broad and focuses on the education and management of patients who have been diagnosed with a primary headache disorder such as migraine and cluster headache.

Following diagnosis, there may be a lot of anxiety and questions about the disorder and its impact on their daily lives and function. The nurse is well placed to discuss the disorder, explains how to use recommended acute and preventive treatments, taking into account each person's headache pattern and lifestyle as well as manage their expectations, given that there is no cure, yet much scope to improve and live well.

The work of the headache nurse may be done in person or virtually (via email or telephone), at intervals between medical appointments. At these appointments it is typical to discuss the patients' current headache pattern, progress with treatment, identify side effect issues, optimize medication dosing, and support patients to withdraw overused painkillers if medication overuse needs to be addressed. Patients are encouraged to keep a daily headache diary to monitor their progress.

Another important role of the headache nurse is to provide support and reassurance on what is available and realistic. Appropriate follow-up and monitoring ensures better adherence to treatment as well as identifying safety issues and taking appropriate rescue action as needed, which may involve switching treatments.

In the hospital or clinic setting the specialist headache, nurse may administer treatments such as greater occipital nerve blocks, botulinum toxin A

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(Botox) injections, CGRP monoclonal antibodies, non-invasive devices, and manage the withdrawal of overused painkiller medication. It is remarkable that the needs of patients with headache are universal across countries.<sup>[3]</sup>

We would suggest that the introduction of a specialist headache nurse into a service will involve a period of education and training with the neurologist or headache/pain specialist. During such a role development process the specialist nurse will acquire knowledge and skills to understand the disorders, take a history, become familiar with available treatments, learn to escalate and optimize treatments effectively and understand when to refer back to the neurologist for medical input. With experience, they will understand the impact of lifestyle on the disor-

ders, acute and preventive treatments, medication overuse, and safe withdrawal, to be able to advise, monitor, and support patients. With proficiency, less supervision is required to carry out the role and services benefit from improved quality and capacity to see more patients.

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