

UBC journalism project documents global pain crisis

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In advance of a United Nations conference today on the global challenges of treating cancer and other diseases, the UBC Graduate School of Journalism has launched an ambitious multimedia site, The Pain Project, which documents one of the greatest challenges to treating chronic illnesses: severely constrained access to morphine.

The Pain Project, www.internationalreporting.org/pain, results from a year-long investigation by UBC's International Reporting Program (IRP). Teams traveled to [India](#), [Ukraine](#) and [Uganda](#) to determine how these countries manage the pain of patients suffering from cancer and other terminal diseases.

Unlike many [global health](#) problems, pain treatment is not about money or a lack of drugs, since [morphine](#) – the gold standard for treating pain – costs pennies per dose and is easy to make. The IRP found that bureaucratic hurdles, and the chilling effect of the global war on drugs, are the main impediments to access to morphine.

"This story of global morphine shortages is one of those issues that both the media and the medical community have overlooked," says Prof. Peter W. Klein, a former 60 Minutes producer who led the project and acting director of UBC's Graduate School of Journalism. "I'm proud we've been able to shed light on this hidden human rights crisis."

In an interview with UBC students for the project, the executive director of the UN Office of Drug Crimes admits that one of the side effects of

drug laws that curtail access to legitimate medical opiates is that some patients around the world suffer needlessly.

The high-level UN Conference on Non-Communicable Diseases begins today in New York and continues Tuesday. The website features a color-coded map that shows the scope of the problem, which extends beyond the developing world. Videos from each of the three countries showcase the stories of patients struggling with pain, and the caregivers who have gone up against intractable systems in order to help them, including:

- A former KGB agent in Ukraine who is dying of prostate cancer and sleeps with a gun under his pillow, in case the pain becomes unbearable
- A Ukrainian man who risks jail time by trafficking narcotics to get patients access to morphine
- An Indian doctor, frustrated with [drug](#) laws, who combines readily available analgesics to ease the pain of local cancer patients
- A nurse who led a successful movement to reform Uganda's rules around morphine distribution and palliative care
- Traditional medicine's role as the first line of treatment for most Ugandans

This website is part of an ongoing project about global access to morphine, which includes a documentary for Al Jazeera, "Freedom from Pain," which aired on July 20, 2011.

This is the third project of the International Reporting Program. Its first documentary, "Ghana: Digital Dumping Ground," was produced in partnership with PBS Frontline/WORLD and won the 2010 Emmy Award for Outstanding Magazine Investigative Reporting. Its second project, "Cheap Shrimp: Hidden Costs," was an online multimedia

project for the Globe and Mail and has just been nominated for a prestigious Online News Association Award.

More information: For more information, visit www.journalism.ubc.ca, www.internationalreporting.org and www.mindsetfoundation.com.

Previous UBC International Reporting Program projects:

Ghana: Digital Dumping Ground (PBS Frontline):
www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/ghana804/index.html

Cheap Shrimp: Hidden Costs (Globe and Mail):
www.internationalreporting.org/shrimp/

Freedom from Pain (Al Jazeera): [english.aljazeera.net/programm ... 720113555645271.html](http://english.aljazeera.net/programm/2011/09/13/555645271.html)

Provided by University of British Columbia

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