Nearly all patients admitted to an acute or critical care unit will experience pain during their stay. Untreated pain causes dissatisfaction for patients and their families. There are many issues related to pain assessment, especially in the nonverbal, sedated, or cognitively impaired adult. It is important that the tool chosen to evaluate pain is easy to use and has been validated for the patient population.

Here’s what you can do:

- Discuss the current pain assessment scales used on your unit.
- Search for evidence supporting use of these scales in your patient population.
- Consider researching alternative pain assessment scales if supporting evidence is weak or unavailable.
- Survey the staff regarding current pain assessment practices in nonverbal, sedated, or cognitively impaired patients.
- Develop a mechanism to assess interrater reliability with the pain assessment scales being used. This may be done formally or informally.
- Challenge your peers to meet the standard of “no untreated pain.”
- Involve family members as appropriate to provide context for your pain assessments.

Other helpful resources:

- AACN Self Assessment: Palliative and End-of-life Care. http://www.aacn.org/PalliativeAndEOL.