

# Legs Matter initiative: making swell progress!



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It is a great privilege to have been the representative for the British Lymphology Society (BLS) as one of the six Legs Matter Coalition Members from the outset. We so often work in silos, within our specialties and organisations, with limited awareness of the wealth of resources and experience available in our colleagues in other organisations or the challenges they face. By bringing together key organisations that are committed to improving outcomes for anyone with a range of lower limb or foot problems, the Legs Matter Campaign is breaking down these barriers.

Legs Matter is fostering a collegiate approach to addressing a range of problems that are extremely distressing, painful and limiting for patients and extremely costly in terms of resources and time, yet are often dismissed as unimportant or approached with trepidation because they are considered chronic and difficult to manage.

The active involvement of BLS in the campaign acknowledges the significant impact that a poorly functioning lymphatic system has on other leg and foot problems and vice versa, resulting in many patients having more than one concurrent pathology. It, therefore, is in the best interests of patients for specialties and organisations to work together to achieve the best possible outcomes for patients.

## UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF LYMPHOEDEMA

This editorial focuses on what BLS brings to the coalition and the importance of understanding the implications of a compromised lymphatic system, particularly lymphoedema/chronic oedema.

A key function of the lymphatic system is to drain fluid from tissue spaces and return it to the circulation for excretion. Lymphoedema, or failure of the lymphatic system drainage, is often referred to as an uncommon condition, which is true in the case of primary lymphoedema as a result of

genetic abnormalities. It is not so of secondary lymphoedema arising from trauma to, or chronic overloading of, the lymphatic drainage system. The current prevalence of lymphoedema is 6:1,000 (National Lymphoedema Partnership, 2019).

## WHAT LIES BENEATH

The cause of lymphoedema influences its presentation and treatment. It is relatively easy to diagnose following specific cancer treatments or cellulitis. However, many people with leg and foot problems, including wounds that are difficult to heal, will present with chronic oedema (present for more than 3 months), a clear indication of a failing lymphatic system. Significant contributory factors may include obesity, immobility and vascular disease. Some common drugs, such as calcium channel blockers and steroids are implicated in lymphatic failure.

## WORKING TOGETHER FOR BETTER PATIENT OUTCOMES

In common with other lower limb and foot conditions, early recognition of lymphoedema and prompt intervention gives better patient outcomes, with less effort, cost and most importantly fewer complications and less suffering for patients. It is also important to recognise that untreated chronic oedema/lymphoedema will get worse without appropriate treatment and lead to skin and tissue changes that increase patient vulnerability to:

- ▶ Infection
- ▶ Wounds
- ▶ Delayed healing
- ▶ Lymphorrhoea/wet legs
- ▶ Discomfort
- ▶ Pain
- ▶ Immobility
- ▶ Weight gain
- ▶ Dependence.

That several key elements of treatment are common to the management of other lower limb

problems enables consistent messages about effective management. These include:

- ▶ Skin cleansing, moisturising and protection
- ▶ Movements and activity to stimulate lymph flow
- ▶ Positioning, i.e. not sleeping in a chair
- ▶ Recognising and responding to signs of cellulitis as per the BLS/Lymphoedema Support Network (2016)
- ▶ Appropriate, prompt compression. Initiate appropriate compression as soon as possible. If a Doppler assessment is unavailable, use the BLS Vascular Assessment Guidance with downloadable assessment tool for safe decision-making until it can be undertaken and avoid harmful delays (BLS, 2018).
- ▶ Maintaining a healthy diet.

#### DEVELOPING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF LYMPHOEDEMA

Being part of the Legs Matter Campaign has been a great learning experience all round as each organisation has shared expertise and resources with members and more widely via the website, social media and encouraged co-working on initiatives such as Legs Matter Week. Involvement of BLS enables a greater understanding of implications of lymphoedema/chronic oedema and where involvement of lymphoedema practitioners may bring added value to members of other organisations in striving for better patient outcomes.

#### PROBLEMS OCCUR IN CLUSTERS AND NEED A COLLEGIATE APPROACH

Lower limb and foot problems, including skin tears, wounds, leg or foot ulcers (diabetic and non-diabetic), chronic oedema, 'leaky legs' are undoubtedly clinically challenging. The frequency with which there is more than one problem to address supports collegiate working and learning from each other to speed up healing/resolution, minimise patient suffering and make more effective use of resources. Over time, we look forward to seeing clinicians in all the specialties seeking out and working with local colleagues, drawing on expertise in podiatry, lymphoedema, vascular and wound management problems. **WUK**

#### REFERENCES

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