

# Legs Matter update: we must learn to truly empathise



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**E**mpathy is a core attribute to any healthcare professional, we are taught this in the first days of any education programme, it is important to remember that empathy is very different from sympathy. Sympathy means understanding someone else's suffering, whereas empathy means experiencing someone else's feelings and having the ability to imagine yourself in their position. The word empathy comes from the German word *Einfühlung* or 'feeling into' and requires an emotional competency to really feel what someone else is feeling.

The Legs Matter campaign was formed through a collective degree of frustration and sympathy for people suffering from lower leg conditions. The leaders of Legs Matter included clinicians and patients with lived experience, Legs Matter has provided me with the opportunity to really get to know one of my patients (Tracy) outside the practitioner/patient environment and reflecting on this journey, I continue to learn and gain greater empathetic understanding of Tracy and her life. I view myself as a 'decent' practitioner, one with a knowledge and understanding of condition/evidence-based practice, someone who listens and actively cares, but when I assess my real degree of empathy there is always something to learn. How much do we really understand a patient's journey? Do we truly appreciate what it is to live with a lower limb condition? Once a wound is healed do we start to think the journey for that patient is over? Do we ever empathise about the long-term fear of recurrence? Do we appreciate the physical and emotional harm experienced by that patient?

**Tracy's thoughts on the matter**

"Having experienced a chronic leg ulcer for many years and knowing how much it affected my life, I live in constant fear of it returning. I understand that because I have vascular insufficiency and damaged veins, I have a high chance of recurrence. Every single time I take

my compression off and look at my ankle, I hold my breath and just hope that today is not the day when my fears are confirmed. I often think about what I would do if it did return and how I would cope. I don't want to go back to the world of chronic pain, sleep deprivation and social isolation. I need to know that if it were to happen, I would get gold standard care no matter where in the country I live. It is vital that a lower leg pathway is in place so that there is a guaranteed level of care. I am confident that it can be nipped in the bud with the right treatment and fast action.

Fortunately, I have experience of this good care. Recently, I was worried about the ulcer as it had started to open again. I was able to make direct contact with the Leg ulcer clinic, was seen within a matter of days. They were able to identify an infection, prescribe antibiotics, as well as advice on most appropriate dressings and the level of compression therapy I needed. Due to the fact I received the right advice and treatment the ulcer healed within four weeks. I am at huge risk of my ulcer returning at any point in my life, especially as I get older, so in the future, I need reassurance that I can see a healthcare professional who has the appropriate skills and knowledge quickly so healing is not delayed. I don't ever want to be in the position where I cannot self-refer, I don't want to imagine a world where I have to attempt to get an appointment with my GP, then request referred to a specialist team, then having to wait weeks for an appointment. The possibility of this makes me feel frightened for my future. Leg ulcers deteriorate so quickly that every day counts".

Tracy words will resonate with all of you through your sympathetic nature, but I would like you all to take a minute and truly empathise. How would you feel if this was you? How would you manage that fear? Would you feel fearful of the future? Would you be confident that you could access the right care at the right time?

Legs Matter are concerned about the future,

we do not believe patients can reliably access the right care at the right time and we are calling for change. Change now — not later!. This year, we will be launching our position on harm document as we truly believe that insufficient action on leg and foot conditions is harming people. The current reality in the UK is that people with leg and foot conditions are not being treated adequately or

in time and, as a result, are being harmed. Harm includes unnecessary pain, infection, amputation, hospitalisation, loss of livelihood, social isolation, anxiety, and depression. This harm is unacceptable and avoidable. We are calling on senior leaders and decision makers within the NHS to radically rethink the way leg and foot conditions are managed in order to reduce harm. **WUK**

Dear healthcare professionals



**Thank you**  
for the amazing  
work you do