Improving venous-lymphatic awareness

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A chronic leg ulcer is defined as a defect in the skin below the knee that has persisted for more than two weeks and shows no sign of healing after three or more months (NHS, 2019). Lower limb and leg ulcer management presents a number of global health challenges in terms of nursing resources, wound care dressings and high recurrence rates. Also, the persistence and recurrence of lower limb conditions can lead to physical and emotional distress for individuals and their families, contributing to depression, lack of esteem, self-neglect, social isolation and loss of income.

To address this global problem, a collaborative process to bring organisations together worldwide was instigated by Professor Sergio Gianesini (president, vWIN Foundation) and fellow likeminded colleagues, who together formed a scientific committee. Lead by Professor Gianesini, a global public and healthcare professionals venous-lymphatic awareness project, titled 'Vein Week', was established by the vWIN Foundation, an international humanitarian not-for profit organisation, with a mission which focuses on evidence-based research in venous and lymphatic disease and related specialties.

Venous pathology is a critical global health concern, which is greatly underestimated and neglected despite leg ulcers and venous thrombosis being one of the leading causes of preventable death.

The vWIN Foundation has made a call to action to improve leg health due to the significant socio-economic impact it is having globally. The Foundation has also stated that lymphoedema is a hidden epidemic, which is in synergy with venous disease as neither have a high profile given the magnitude of the problem. The collaboration between the vWIN Foundation and other international organisations resulted in a coordinated approach to raise global awareness and prevention by supporting the international Health Awareness week being held in April 2021. The rationale of this collaborative partnership was to achieve the same goal, and cultivate global awareness and improve prevention of venous and lymphatic health problems by raising the profile to the public of 'Healthy Legs', as important and necessary for continued mobility and good health.

BACKGROUND

Problems of the lower limb are particularly common among older adults. Leg ulceration has been referred to as 'the hidden health crisis' having a long-term impact on people's lives and creating considerable expense for healthcare systems (Lindsay, 2021), with many leg ulcers recurring or remaining unhealed for many months or even years.

Lower limb venous conditions and leg ulcers present several challenges to the individual, from physical and emotional distress, lack of self-esteem, depression, self-neglect, social isolation to financial cost to the person in terms of time off work, and travelling distances to centres or hospitals. In addition to the high costs of wound care in terms of nursing resources and dressings, protracted healing time and high recurrence rates, there is disparity in care delivery, as a significant number of NHS trusts have acknowledged that they have neither a pathway for venous conditions, nor multidisciplinary teams available for the treatment of venous disease (All Party Parliamentary Group on Vascular Disease [APPG], 2019). Hence, one major challenge in ageing societies today is how to create meaningful pathways for older persons to experience late life living with a wound, while simultaneously contributing towards society.

People's needs are multifactorial, but sadly are sometimes disregarded, and this is certainly the case in lower limb and lymphatic care, as individuals have to deal not only with their health-related problems, but also poor mobility, chronic pain, stigma, social isolation, lack of self-worth and poor wellbeing — all of which can lead to depression. A way to emphasise the severity of the problems associated with venous-related issues is through public health programmes, which have grown exponentially in the past two decades. These are bringing about increasing awareness within governments

of the prevalence and problems associated with the lower limb and foot, and the negative consequences and repercussions they have for the individual, their family and the wider health economy. It is hoped that establishing partnerships with the vWIN Foundation and other key stakeholders at an international level will help provide a much-needed coordinated strategy to understand, communicate and support all individuals who are potentially, or are currently experiencing venous and lymphatic-related problems.

VEIN WEEK

At the request of Professor Gianesini, Ellie Lindsay OBE was invited to join the vWIN team as a developer representing the work of the psychosocial Leg Club model and supporting a global public and health professionals' venous-lymphatic awareness project. Accepting the role of developer, she formed an International Leg Club Committee utilising a multi-agency approach, which comprised clinicians, academics, and non-medical colleagues working in lower limb care and related subjects. The International Leg Club Committee pledged to work in collaboration with the vWIN Foundation to support 'Vein Week' through a calendar of events that would provide education and venous-lymphatic understanding to both healthcare professionals and the general public.

The International Leg Club Committee created an eclectic programme of events throughout 'Vein Week', both from within the committee and inviting eminent specialists from the USA, Australia and UK in the field of venous and lymphatic-related issues. The presentations during the week addressed both professionals and public with topics such as health psychology and sociology, latest surgical procedures, health promotion, early referrals and utilisation of media, thereby championing the overall strategic plan for vWIN Vein Week.

This collaboration with both the International Leg Club Committee and vWIN Foundation also endeavoured to foster a stronger voice with which to influence national policies, stimulate interest and further the knowledge and understanding of what it is like living with lower limb problems by:

- Raising awareness of vascular disease among the public, health and social care professionals, as well as UK government organisations and healthcare providers
- Being available throughout the process to encourage and support the international vWIN committee through media
- Encouraging close working relationships between member associations to facilitate the sharing of information and effective use of resources
- Campaigning to highlight the need for effective, accessible and safe therapies for vascular disease. More than 200 events have been uploaded from all around the world, showing the importance the topic has in all continents.

DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Throughout the week, there were presentations from the USA, Australia and UK, with involvement from multi-medical specialities via webinars, zoom meetings and activities for non-healthcare professionals on vein awareness, including the importance of early diagnosis and treatment and some simple and easy-to-follow tips for lower limb movement and exercise. There were also insights into what takes place at Leg Clubs with a video of interviews with Leg Club clinicians, volunteers, members (patients) and the healthcare industry.

Wednesday 7th April was World Health Day and events focused on enhancing venous-lymphatic awareness presence on the global healthcare agenda supported by media. The week concluded with social and sporting events.

A large part of preventing venous lymphatic disorders can be achieved by encouraging people to be more active. Over the years our lives have become a lot more sedentary, and an important aspect of the awareness week was supporting the uptake of movement and leg exercise.

The International Leg Club Committee created numerous flyers to promote the week's events, and to bring the week to a close a flyer encouraging everyone to support the health awareness week by taking part in the Leg Club/vWIN Vein 'Week 21 Challenge' was produced. The rationale of this was to highlight the importance of keeping the calf muscle pump working through movement and to get all age groups, especially individuals who are housebound or experiencing limited mobility, to do '21' exercises. More information on the work of the vWIN Foundation is available at the following link: www.vwinfoundation.com/vw **JCN**

REFERENCES

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