

Is there a need for expansion of public health knowledge relating to lower limb and foot care?



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CAN A COALITION APPROACH ENHANCE PUBLIC HEALTH?

The expansion of public health knowledge in this technological age has given practitioners the potential to present a collective voice to drive resource allocation for wound care pathways. This has been especially beneficial in taking education forward, relating to prevention, wound management and research for people experiencing problems of the lower limb, lymphoedema, chronic wounds and foot-related issues. However, in spite of healthcare resource and associated spending, currently in the UK there is little effective advocacy at a national level. It is reasonable to expect that modest attention to this could boost its benefits.

In recent years, the financial burden of leg and foot ulcers in the UK has been highlighted in data studies and often combined tragically with many people who have lived with wounds for many years. A way to emphasise the severity of the problem is through public health programs, which have grown exponentially in the past two decades. These public health programs 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.

The changing needs of society, advances in technology and the public's increased knowledge regarding health have contributed to identifying the need for more general public information which can ultimately lead to early prevention, referral pathways and intervention of lower limb-related issues. However, this requires providing people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to take full control of their lives, as well as making it easy for them to make healthy choices, through sound knowledge and understanding of their condition.

To embrace the concept of public health education purposely targeted at the lower limb, it was acknowledged by a group of likeminded clinicians that a public campaign was required, targeted at a wider audience of multidisciplinary teams and the general public.

Following a meeting of third sector societies, and under the auspices of the Tissue Viability Society, a coalition was established with a pledge to work collaboratively. The coalition's ultimate aim was to look at ways of addressing current problems and what was required to influence public knowledge and clinical practice. The objective of the project was to engage NHS colleagues, individuals and their families, who were experiencing leg-related conditions, in a constructive, productive manner.

The structure and remit of the associations was to provide evidence-based clinical knowledge and the opportunity for practitioners to work creatively in order for them to expand their skills in the provision of optimal lower limb management. The organisations involved were deeply concerned about the cost, in both fiscal and human terms, regarding lower limb care. They firmly believed that those in their care had a right to expect best practice and, with this objective in mind, the Legs Matter campaign was launched.

THE LEGS MATTER ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE

Most of us will become dependent on the healthcare system at some point in our lives and many of us have tried to get support from healthcare providers. In some instances, we may have been disappointed by the autocratic approach received, as opposed to being actively involved and having a voice in our treatment or that of a loved one. While traditional boundaries of specialisation and working practice will continue to be challenged, prevention, early intervention and management of complex care packages should lead the way in providing high-quality, cost-effective care. However, this requires effective communication. This is a key component in promoting health education, as it provides the basis for the development of a vibrant, therapeutic and educative process in preparation for meeting the health needs of today's society.

We live in a digital age and this has changed the landscape of health information as people seek health-related information via the Internet and social media. However, with the changing health information

environment, the undercurrents between those receiving care and their healthcare professionals is also changing. Along with technology, the success of Legs Matter is being achieved by addressing public health and education through interactive communication and education with clinicians and the public.

Since its formation and official launch, the role of Legs Matter has largely become one of raising public awareness, via the creation of an informative multimedia information platform. It has made considerable progress, transforming the level of awareness of its organisations' activities within the NHS sector and with the public at large.

Over the past three years, I have been privileged to work alongside my fellow colleagues, all of whom are committed to Legs Matter and its advancement of educational health promotion projects. This has necessitated a collaborative process, where individuals from a broad spectrum of organisations contribute to the creation and implementation of new ideas. The main focus of work undertaken by the Legs Matter members has been to develop clinical and public knowledge through extensive collaborations between clinicians and individuals who have personal experience of living with limb-related problems.

CURRENT STATUS

The world is experiencing uncertain times right now; nonetheless, clinical and public health education continues to be incredibly important to us, especially as many sufferers with lower limb and foot problems may have multiple clinical and psychosocial needs. On the clinical side, an individual's wound is often indicative of long-term conditions and may be hard to heal. If poorly treated, leg ulcers will lead to persistent pain, markedly decreased mobility and greater risk of infection, all of which may require radical and costly interventions.

Building on the resounding success of the 2019 Legs Matter public awareness week, where clinicians, volunteers and the public effectively embraced the week, it was planned to replicate this again in 2020. However, due to the pandemic, remote working and virtual meetings have become a major feature of working for the team to move forward with its plans.

Although the loss of face-to-face interactions has been difficult and left little time to plan, it has not been an entirely negative situation. Respecting our colleagues work-life balance has been important, and this has been

valued between partners whilst remaining committed to the aim of continuing the expansion and evolution of the Legs Matter public health campaign in UK, albeit through different avenues.

OUTCOMES TO DATE

Our different organisations have very distinct audiences but came together under the umbrella of 'Legs Matter.' Together we have created a national campaign which resonates with both the public and healthcare professionals and conveys the single vision to increase awareness of lower limb conditions and ultimately reshape and improve their care. The Legs Matter coalition is significant because it is the first time that we have a wide range of organisations coming together to raise awareness of the importance of leg health. The aim is to get the nation thinking and talking about leg and foot conditions, including non-healing wounds and varicose veins, and acting on them.

The Legs Matter mission has been a huge success to date, both within the public and NHS sector. It is constantly evolving, despite the austere health economy, and is creating a culture where those in our care feel safe. Also, it has been a time for the group to inspire and show creativity and resourcefulness to fellow colleagues. As a motivated consortium, we have to accept that things will never be as they were before the pandemic, but that's not something to fear. The spirit and positivity of the coalition utilises innovation and creativity to maintain the campaign of public health awareness and the challenges we face, including difficulties and needs we don't even know about yet!

When clinics and Leg Clubs® re-open, they are going to look very different from pre-lockdown. New layouts for treatment areas and meeting/treatment rooms are going to be needed as social distancing rules will have to comply with different regulations within the NHS sector. However, out of every crisis come opportunities and innovation. As a collective group, we have already diversified and changed the way we work, and are looking at what the 'new normal' means for the team, as public and clinical awareness is the cornerstone of our campaign.

As we move forward, we are excited for the next phase of Legs Matter. We remain optimistic and are reacting to the evolving situation, continuing to work collectively, whilst acknowledging that new styles of bringing colleagues with diverse ideas together will be challenging, but ultimately extremely rewarding. ■