Improving chronic oedema management across a PCT: The past, present and future

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Chronic oedema is an accumulation of fluid, proteins and other macro-molecules leading to tissue swelling, skin changes and fibrosclerosis that has lasted longer than 3 months (Linnit 2005). It is a condition that is becoming an increasing issue for all healthcare professionals. Chronic oedema is recognized within the body of evidence as a progressive symptom of chronic venous disease (Williams 2009).

Worcestershire PCT covers 555,000 population. A recent study by Blackburn et al (2009) found that 1.22% of a PCT population had chronic oedema; if these figures were applied to Worcestershire PCT’s population, it would suggest that over 6000 were suffering from chronic oedema. Nurses within the Trust were acknowledging that the management of the condition was an increasing issue. The challenge was therefore to modify assessment and management strategies across the Trust to provide a better standard of care for those suffering from this condition.

Aims
The aims of introducing a strategic approach for chronic oedema management were as follows:

- To implement an accessible evidence based training programme
- To standardise care through the use of training and web based guidelines
- To provide cost effective treatment within safe parameters

Method
An audit within the Worcestershire Primary Care County Tissue Viability team established chronic oedema management and, in particular, management of lymphorrhoea as specific challenges. The identification, assessment and management of patients with chronic oedema were identified as crucial by 22 of the 22 staff audited. However, only 3 could apply full leg bandaging and 80% of the team were not competent in applying full leg bandaging. The need for a strategic approach to improving care for patients with chronic oedema was identified.

A bespoke educational programme has been agreed by tissue viability, lymphoedema and a commercial lymphoedema specialist nurse. The educational programme incorporates theory and practical elements surrounding chronic oedema management. This includes the need for assessment, diagnosis, skin care, exercises, patient information, as well as full leg bandaging and hoisery training.

Educational sessions have taken place at a number of centres, in an attempt to cover the Trust both geographically and professionally. Those who are trained to apply compression are encouraged to attend, in order to extend their pre-existing competence. The aim was to implement, disseminate and promote best practices in chronic oedema care.

Feedback from this programme has been extremely positive. However, it was felt that the development of Trust guidelines for the management of chronic oedema and competencies for the use of hoisery and bandaging for chronic oedema were required to further consolidate the knowledge and skills gained from the programme.

There is evidence to suggest that guideline driven care can lead to improved outcomes (Thomas, L. (1999). Trust Guidelines already existed for Doppler ultrasound and the management of leg ulceration. With nursing staff becoming more actively involved in the management of patients with chronic oedema throughout the Trust, it was felt that the introduction of guidelines for the management of chronic oedema would further promote continuity.

The guidelines provide an evidence based framework for managing the condition effectively. They promote early identification, assessment and management. In relation to compression therapy, the guidelines endorse the use of cohesive short stretch bandaging and the use of EU standard hoisery, as per formulary. Competencies have also been developed to encourage safe and effective use of these forms of compression.

In order to maximise accessibility, the Guidelines for the management of chronic oedema and associated competencies are to be made available on the Trust’s website. The Trust has a page dedicated to tissue viability and associated conditions. Staff are encouraged to use the site to keep up to date with current practice, education and training.

Results
Over 200 staff have received formal chronic oedema training since January 2009. These staff have received an extension to their previously developed leg ulcer skills, which allows for more comprehensive treatment of patients with chronic oedema and associated problems.

Feedback from those attending has been extremely positive, with staff acknowledging the relevance of such training to their role and positive outcomes for the patient. During all training, evaluation forms were completed, 100% of respondents rated the information received as highly useful. 100% of respondents rated the information as either highly relevant or relevant to their role (77% highly relevant and 23% relevant). Additional comments were also noted, such as:

“This very useful and informative study day... my assessment of patients will improve and make me more effective in practice.”

“This very informative day that was easy to relate to my practice... Would recommend this training to my colleagues”

This training has led to an increased level of care within the PCT, with patients now being assessed by Tissue Viability and lymphoedema and referred to both acute and community staff for appropriate re-assessment, application of compression therapy and provision of skin care.

The County lymphoedema service has also seen an increased number of referrals concurrent to the training, which is likely to be due to raised awareness. Growth and development of the lymphoedema clinic, particularly where education is concerned, has given rise to the appointment of another nurse within the service.

Discussion
Partnership has been pivotal to the success of this strategic programme; including community, acute, Leg Club®, relevant industry, tissue viability and lymphoedema specialists. A strategic plan for chronic oedema has been implemented and chronic oedema training is now a mandatory component of the validated Leg Ulcer Course which will ensure that uptake is further improved in the future. A specialist nurse has been appointed on an honorary contract to further explore scope for developments in education, care provision and the cost benefits from an economic and quality of life perspective. It is envisaged that exploring the benefits of implementing such training and treatment will highlight the balance between cost minimisation and quality of life.

References
Williams, A (Oct 2006), Chronic Oedema in patients with CVI and ulceration of the lower limb, BJUJN1:4(10) Supp6:S4-S8
Linnit N, (Mar 2005), Lymphoedema recognition, assessment and management, BJUJN1:103 Supp6:S20-S25