

New approach for chronic wound care

Over half a million Australians suffer from chronic wounds each year according to Wounds Australia, the country's peak body for wound care. Their treatment costs our health system \$3 billion annually. A new team at Castlemaine Health are working to provide better, more coordinated chronic wounds care and improve the outcomes for people in our community. Chronic wounds don't progress through the stages of healing normally, tending to heal at a much slower rate or only partially heal. They also frequently reoccur. Any acute wound can become chronic, but the most common chronic wounds are pressure injuries (also known as bedsores), diabetic ulcers, leg ulcers and venous ulcers. People who suffer from chronic wounds experience pain, reduced mobility and complications including infections. Their condition also impacts on their quality of life. Often stuck at home, unable to engage with the activities they enjoy, sufferers frequently feel isolated and can be more likely to experience more serious mental health issues including depression and anxiety. People aged 65 or more are at higher risk of having a chronic wound. With our ageing population this is going to be a growing problem in our communities.

Castlemaine Health podiatrist Rachel Fry says the new tissue care clinic at Castlemaine Health brings together existing services in a more coordinated way and is proving extremely beneficial to patients with chronic wounds.

"What's unique about the service is the multidisciplinary approach," says Rachel. "People's perception is often that a wound is going to heal with what we put on it, but that isn't the case. With wound care the focus is on the body's ability to heal the wound."

Almost always associated with underlying chronic diseases, chronic wounds need accurate diagnosis and special care to address the root cause and minimise the risk of recurrence.

"Leg wounds for example, are frequently caused by oedema, or swelling," says Rachel.

"We need to address the swelling, which is most likely the result of an underlying illness, like lymphedema, a heart condition or kidney disease before the wound is going to get better."

"It's only by taking the pressure off, improving blood flow, even improving nutrition, that we can hope to heal the wound."

Castlemaine Health has always been able to provide care for people with a range of different types of wounds and regularly

referred between services, but specialists often worked in isolation. The clinic takes a new approach.

Bringing together the skills of specialists in the fields of nursing, podiatry, nutrition, occupational therapy and physiotherapy, the tissue care clinic team meets weekly to share information and develop plans to support each patient. They also link in with the complex care team (formerly the HARP team) who can work with individuals on some of the medical and social challenges that can be barriers to healing wounds, along with external services.

"A chronic wound has happened because there's a physical breakdown somewhere in the body," says district nursing manager Ian Morelli.

"It really does take a team of people to heal it."

Ian says the team's main aim is prevention and the multidisciplinary approach is helping them achieve this.

"It's very common for these wounds to reoccur," he says.

"This can happen for a number of reasons." "The great thing about the tissue care clinic is that it's enabling us to really get to know each patient and deliver the support and resources that work for them."



Castlemaine Health podiatrist Rachel Fry and district nursing manager Ian Morelli.



Q&A

Q: Are there factors that can delay wound healing?

A: Yes. Unfortunately those most in need of effective healing of wounds are also most likely to have risk factors for delayed healing. They include arthritis, chronic liver disease, difficulty eating a healthy diet, excess alcohol intake, poor circulation, a weakened immune system and smoking.

Q: Are there signs to look out for?

A: Yes, if you recognise any of these warning signs you need to see your doctor. Look out for wounds that are:

- Red, swollen, hot to touch and painful
- Have a strange or unpleasant smell
- Have a thick, yellowish fluid
- Taking longer than a month to heal or keep returning.

If you or someone you know is suffering from a chronic wound speak to your GP about the tissue care clinic or contact the Community Rehabilitation Centre at Castlemaine Health on 5471 3575 for more information.



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