

Evaluation of new lymphoedema drug tariff garments for lower limbs

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Introduction

Lymphoedema is the accumulation of excess fluid in the body caused by obstruction of the lymphatic drainage mechanisms (Badger et al. 2004). It is a potentially disfiguring chronic condition that can have significant physical, psychological and social consequences for the affected individual (Lund 2000). The incidence of lymphoedema is now shown to be a common problem affecting over 80,000 people in the UK (Moffatt 2003)

Lymphoedema and leg ulcer patients

Further studies have identified a high incidence of lower limb lymphoedema in leg ulcer patients, and patients with chronic oedema are often first seen by the community nurse (Williams 2003). As trained therapists are in short supply, it is important for education and available treatments to be accessible to all practitioners with referral to the specialist where necessary. Delays in diagnosis, referral and implementation of the correct treatment can be harmful for the patient and an inappropriate use of resources (Green, Mason 2006). Lymphoedema is a chronic condition which will continue to worsen if the appropriate treatment is not commenced leading to the risk of recurrent cellulitis, increased skin changes and further damage to the superficial lymphatics (Linnitt 2005).

Management involves decongesting the reduced lymphatic pathways in order to reduce the size of the affected area (Badger et al. 2004) and treatment generally consists of a combination of skin care, compression with inelastic bandages, exercises and massage to increase lymph drainage. Once the limb volume and shape distortion are under control, specialist compression hosiery garments with a high stiffness index are worn to maintain improvements (Lund 2000).

Availability and patient concordance

The National Lymphoedema Framework negotiated with the Department of Health to add a lymphoedema category to the drug tariff, and this has enabled practitioners to access lymphoedema garments on FP10. This inclusion has meant that Lymphoedema Specialists could transfer the care of these patients to community nurses who may already be seeing them. Activa have introduced a new compression system (Actilymph®) designed specifically for lymphoedema, making selection and treatment easier for those healthcare professionals who are not specialists in lymphoedema.

Method

The evaluation process was explained to the patients and consent was obtained. Each patient was measured for the hosiery to ensure an appropriate fit, and following application training, the evaluation commenced. The hosiery was then applied and reassessed over several weeks. Patients with varying limb sizes requiring both below knee and thigh length garments were entered into the evaluation.



The parameters that were measured were the ease of application, how well the hosiery remained in place without slippage, whether the size proportions were correct for each individual, the maintenance of limb size, whether it was cosmetically acceptable and the effect of washing on the material. These parameters were assessed against the hosiery previously used by each individual patient.

Results

Seven patients took part in the evaluation. 6 out of 7 found the hosiery to be easy to apply and remove. 5 out of 7 found the hosiery stayed in place and were the correct proportions for their requirements.

4 patients found the hosiery maintained their limb proportions. 7 out of 7 found the Actilymph hosiery to be cosmetically acceptable, the fabric to be acceptable and they washed well.

Discussion

There is no cure for lymphoedema, but with the correct diagnosis and treatment, the practitioner can relieve some of the more distressing symptoms. Additionally patient and nurse education can lead to a greater awareness of the long term care that is required to maintain skin integrity and limb size. As hosiery is worn for life, it is essential to ensure that the garments that are chosen are comfortable, effective and suitable for each patient.

Conclusion

Actilymph provides a simple method of treating and managing lymphoedema and can only improve patient's quality of life.

References

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