

Useful treatment; manual lymph drainage helps those with lymphedema

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There's no cure for it.

And most of the treatments readily available for lymphedema are relatively ineffective.

Often, compression sleeves are prescribed, designed to add pressure to the area and squeeze the lymphatic fluid out of the swollen tissue, explained registered massage therapist John Mulligan. "It doesn't really help," Mulligan said.

Lymphedema is caused when the body's lymphatic system is damaged or blocked. It causes swelling of limbs or the chest as the lymphatic fluid builds up, and can lead to a loss of mobility.

However, there is one treatment, called manual lymph drainage, that has proved useful.

While it's relatively new here, it's been around for about 70 years. It was first developed in the 1930s by a husband and wife team of massage therapists working on the French Riviera, Mulligan said.

It's a gentle massage treatment that "mimics the pumping action of the lymphatic system," he said. "Basically, you're stimulating the lymphatic system to pump at a higher amplitude."

In some cases, compression bandaging is also used. The problem is, there are very few people across the province qualified to provide that treatment. Mulligan only knows of a dozen or so people in Ontario who can provide the treatment. And he's one of them.

Lymphedema is a lot more common in tropical areas, where it's caused by mosquito-borne parasites, than it is here. Most of the people who have the disease in this area, acquired it after a trauma or as a side-effect of breast cancer surgery. "The risk factor for developing lymphedema after breast cancer surgery can be as high as 40 per cent. That's over a 20 year follow up period," Mulligan said. People can also be born with the illness.

Over the past two years, since he was trained to do the procedure, Mulligan has been doing his best to help those people recover. He's treated dozens of people with lymphedema at the Fort Erie clinic he opened two years ago. In April, Mulligan expanded his practice to include two days a week at B. Elliott and Associates Medical Massage Therapy Clinic on East Main Street.

The treatment has garnered impressive results for his clients. He put together a brochure of his clients to demonstrate the effectiveness of the treatment. The brochure shows before and after pictures of people with badly swollen arms and legs, and then the normal looking limbs after being treated for the disease.

"This swelling was as hard as saddle leather," Mulligan said - pointing to a photograph in his brochure. Two months later, the swelling was all but gone. "You start seeing the difference within minutes," he added. "It's pretty intensive therapy, but you're also training the clients to do it themselves as much as possible."

He stressed that the treatment is "not a cure," but it can help clients reduce the swelling and manage their lymphedema.

He also teaches his clients how to perform the technique on themselves.

Clients, he added, need to know how to perform the treatment on themselves to keep the lymphedema at bay.

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