

# Time to change: the importance of public health education on lower limb care

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**T**he annual Legs Matter coalition week took place in October after another difficult year marked by COVID-19. Yet, through the commitment and dedication of the group, we were delighted to introduce another eclectic programme, albeit a virtual one.

## So why is education an important topic for Legs Matter week?

Over the years I have written many articles on the need for public education and patient empowerment, as well as the importance of embracing a change of approach towards patients among the nursing profession—to move away from autocracy. And, since 2004, the UK government's mantra has been to ensure that the public and patients are empowered with greater choice, better public health information and more control over their health and lifestyles. Despite this, little has changed in everyday practice relating to patient and family engagement. Only lateral thinking by clinicians has enabled new ways of working to be embraced.

Many patients play a passive role in their care rather than being a partner with the healthcare team. Yet, the government's modernisation programme talks of putting patients at the heart of health and social care by empowering them to make greater choices and take control of treatment and ill health prevention. We should always prioritise the public's health education and wellbeing needs, and, as practitioners, we should strive to educate and empower individuals to lead happier and more fulfilling lives.

Since 1995, I have consistently acknowledged that patient empowerment is not an easy concept. It is inevitable that some nurses and nurse managers are uncomfortable with the notion of moving from a 'nurse dominant/patient passive' relationship to one of an equal partnership in care.

During the 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, our patients and their family members have been largely unable to

obtain face-to-face support from healthcare providers. Clinical teams have had to radically adapt care delivery, and digital technology has enabled many teams to provide innovative wound-care management via remote consultations.

This is an exciting and challenging time for those involved in treating and preventing problems of the lower limb and foot, and practitioners should be encouraged by the prospect of developing new ways of working to deliver evidence-based care in partnership with patients and colleagues.

The content of October's Legs Matter week programme aimed to highlight the need for action and encourage interprofessional teams to act as change agents within public and clinical groups: for example, by disseminating information, as well as encouraging and promoting additional services for patients of all age groups, empowering them to make informed choices while interacting with others in a similar situation.

## A change in culture

The prospect of changing culture and practice can be daunting in the current market-driven healthcare economy. This may create resistance in some quarters. The paternalistic structures that dominate health care are changing and I think that, in the near future, our wound-care patients will be thoroughly engaged in their courses of treatment and will become involved in their own care in effective and dynamic ways.

As professionals, we must recognise the general public's expectations and need for preventive health promotion and education, with the objectives of improving quality of life, extending life and reducing the effects of impaired physical health. As clinicians we know the importance that physical health has for quality of life. But it is meaningless without also having good mental wellbeing. Nurses can lead the way in providing cost-effective, high-quality care, enabling people to remain at good functional levels

of physical and mental wellness in their professional and social environments.

The hard work, time and commitment devoted by all those involved in Legs Matter have once again helped raise the profile and importance of giving patients and their families a voice during Legs Matter week.

The first-hand experience of those involved in the initiative and the need for public health promotion and education gave this year's event a distinctive approach, with the championing of this important issue through the lived experience of patients. Some patients' stories are available on the Legs Matter website (<https://legsmatter.org/legs-matter-week/stories/>).

The Legs Matter educational commitment has come about due to individual coalition organisation websites consistently identifying significant issues of concern raised by members of the public, who seek not only knowledge of their condition and what to expect from treatment, but also want to find out about the help available and whom to contact for support.

Patients' stories of isolation, loneliness, stigma, pain, mental health and wellbeing are extremely moving. During telephone conversations with patients in distress, one can sometimes feel impotent. Hence, Legs Matter 2021 week provided both the public and clinicians with a great opportunity to embrace an innovative partnership focused on person-centred care and new ways of working, delivering public education on health care that people expect and deserve.

The NHS is facing challenges and uncertainty, with service delivery altering in response to the pandemic. Nurses must respond proactively, and also ensure that they address patients' mental health needs, which, post-COVID-19, will define the nation's health for years to come.

More information, including a consensus document setting out the Legs Matter coalition's case for the transformation of lower limb management, is available on the website (<https://legsmatter.org>). **BJN**