

When does one need a wound care center?

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When a person gets a wound, he or she has every expectation that, with proper care, it will heal.

That is not always the case though and that's when a wound care center, like the one at Exeter Hospital, can become vital to recovery. Since many people are unfamiliar with the role of a wound care center, Dr. Kathleen Kelly, director of Exeter Hospital's Center for Wound Healing, and Joanne Yow, RN, and clinical coordinator for the center, talked about what it is they do, the conditions where their services might be needed and how they are better equipped to treat a wound that is not healing naturally.

Wound specialists are trained in the care and treatment of all types of wounds, acute and chronic. Among the most commonly treated wounds are those suffered from an acute injury, surgical wounds, diabetic wounds and pressure sores. Without proper care, these wounds can become infected, even septic.

Other wounds requiring a wound care center can include wounds from vascular insufficiencies, severe wounds initially seen in an emergency room and radiation wounds.

"Venous disease, arterial disease and neurologic diseases can result in severe wounds," Kelley said. "Some wounds from trauma can resist healing, often burns like from a heater at a campfire. I don't think people realize how many wounds have insufficient healing. About 5 million Americans are treated in wound centers each year."

Kelly said many people do not understand what is hindering their ability to heal. She said often lifestyle and diet can play a role.

“Co-morbidities like diabetes and vascular disease can greatly hinder healing capabilities,” Yow said. “Clinics like ours will look at the whole patient, not just the hole in the person. Many of us develop habits that can deteriorate our health, the way we eat, exercise, our salt intake and how we generally take care of ourselves. It can have an impact on our ability to heal.”

Kelly said that even a wound that heals can leave weakened areas. She said the scar tissue in a severe wound is not as strong as the rest of the skin and can reopen without care.

“The area gets weaker each time there is a reopening,” Kelly said.

Yow said the approach of the wound care center is to work collaboratively with the patient, to help him or her learn ways to promote healing and to prevent recurrences of the same injury.

“There are people who live with poor choices,” Yow said. “Then there are those, like people with diabetes where their condition gets out of their control. The result is neuropathy and ulcerations. They may not even feel the injury because of damage to their nerves. We teach them to take better care of themselves. They need to inspect their feet regularly to watch for damage before it is severe.”

Venous insufficiency can result in swollen legs. Kelly said their treatment will include elevation, exercise and the use of compression stockings.

“Compression stockings do not have to be the little old lady brown things,” said Kelly. “There are designers now who offer plaids, stripes. There is no cosmetic reason not to use them if needed.”

What is a hindrance to the use of compression stockings is that they are costly and many insurance companies do not cover them.

“It’s crazy and a big struggle,” Kelly said. “Insurance companies will pay thousands upon thousands for venous surgeries and yet not pay \$40 for a pair of needed stockings. People really need about four pairs a year, so the expense adds up. Then they don’t use them.”

Lifestyle changes affect healing. Yow said they urge their patients to quit smoking. She said they will help them get all the support products and services available but the patient must be willing to quit.

“Here’s how important not smoking is to wound care,” said Kelly. “There is a huge connection to smoking and healing. With the first drag you take, you lose 20 minutes of healing time. It causes spasms in the capillaries, the smallest blood vessels which feed the wound bed. A pack of

20 cigarettes, multiplied by that 20 minutes – no healing is going to take place. Cells heal by moving from the outside of the wound in, to cover the wound. For every cigarette you don't smoke, add 20 minutes of healing time.”

In many cases, age is a factor in healing. Kelly said kids are indestructible and will heal much faster than will an elderly patient.

Mobility problems can result in the need of wound care services. Pressure wounds happen when a person is immobile, or bedridden for long periods of time.

“The only way to begin healing these cases is to offload the pressure on the wound,” Kelly said. “Often they do not have the feeling to realize they are being injured. They can be dehydrated and the result is the sharp bones will push through the skin. We need to take the pressure off and to educate the family about the need to move them, to reposition the person often to avoid pressure wounds. We need to look at the bed and see if it is too hard.”

Yow said wound care centers are experts in the various products used to treat a wound. Not all products are good for all wounds.

“The adage that things like hydrogen peroxide and bacitracin work because they hurt need not apply anymore,” Kelly said. “Even the type of gauze must be considered. In most cases, we want one that will not trap moisture on the skin. Assessing the skin is important. Red skin does not necessarily indicate an infection, so we need to know why it is red.”

Yow said they focus on trying to get their patients to make positive lifestyle changes that will help make the center's treatments more effective.

“Nobody got to be our patient because of the good things that have happened to them,” Yow said.

The key to wound care is understanding. Kelly said wounds heal differently for everyone and improvements are not seen overnight. Education for the patient and his or her family is important for care of a wound that is difficult to heal.