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CHALLENGING THE MYTHS:
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CHRONIC LEG ULCERS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree
of Master of Arts in Nursing
at Massey University

Marian Bland
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ABSTRACT

Leg ulcers are a chronic condition that affects a significant number of New Zealanders. While the management of the ulcers themselves has received much attention in the nursing and medical literature, little is known about what it is like to live with chronic leg ulcers, and how they impact on quality of life.

A review of the nursing literature relating to leg ulcers reveals a focus on wound management, and a failure to appreciate the perspective of these patients. It is frequently stated in the nursing literature that these patients deliberately delay the healing of their ulcers to ensure continued contact with the nurses.

This exploratory study utilised Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology to examine the experiences of five men and four women with chronic leg ulcers, revealing the comprehensive nature of the suffering that accompanies this condition. Much discomfort and distress is caused by the ulcers themselves, which is then compounded by the problems associated with the treatment regimes.

The presence of ulcers impacts on virtually every aspect of daily life. Study participants had worked hard to minimise that suffering, with the differences created by the ulcers becoming part of a taken-for-granted way of being-in-the-world. They desperately wanted their ulcers to heal, and were prepared to do everything they could to achieve this. But the potential benefits of some treatment regimes must be balanced against the ongoing disruptions that such regimes would cause to their ability to lead a reasonably normal life.

This study challenges the myths that surround patients with leg ulcers, and highlights the need for health professionals to move from a focus on wound management to understanding the specific needs of each individual within the context of their daily life.
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* To Dr Irena Madjar, who introduced me to phenomenology, and to an awareness of the importance for nursing of being able to understand the patient’s experience of illness.

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