

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**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  
1994**

## 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.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful for the support and encouragement I have received with this study over the past two years, and wish that I could record here the numerous contributions made by friends, family, nursing colleagues and fellow masters students. There are some whose contribution has been vital to the completion of this study, and it gives me much pleasure to be able to acknowledge them now:

- \* To my study participants, who freely shared their experiences with me, and who inspired me with their courage in the face of such chronic suffering. I hope I have been able to do justice to your stories.
  
- \* To the Bland men, Chris, Paul, David, Ross (and Helen), and the Doherty women, for their love, support and understanding. A special thanks to Chris who patiently retrieved me from potential disasters with the computer on more occasions than he would care to remember.
  
- \* To Phyllis Campbell and Patricia Sybenga, who refused to let leg ulcers dominate their lives, and have contributed much to my understanding of what it is like to live with this condition.
  
- \* 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.
  
- \* Finally, a very special thanks to Jo-Ann Walton, my thesis supervisor, who has gently guided this study, and contributed more than can be described with her expertise and encouragement.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
KEY TO TRANSCRIPTS .....	viii
<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b>	
<b>INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>LEG ULCER MANAGEMENT IN THE NEW ZEALAND</b>	
CONTEXT .....	6
STUDY OVERVIEW .....	8
<b>CHAPTER TWO:</b>	
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>LEG ULCERS .....</b>	<b>10</b>
The History of Leg Ulcers .....	10
Prevalence of leg ulceration .....	12
Management of leg ulcers. ....	13
Attitudes to leg ulcers .....	16
The cost of leg ulcers .....	17
<b>CHRONIC ILLNESS .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE:</b>	
<b>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL VIEW OF THE PERSON. ....</b>	<b>27</b>

NURSING AND PHENOMENOLOGY .....	29
PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	30
Orienting to the Phenomenon .....	30
Formulating the Phenomenological Question: .....	31
Explicating Assumptions and Pre-understandings .....	31
Data collection .....	32
Data analysis .....	34
TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY FINDINGS .....	35
STUDY DESIGN .....	37
Criteria for inclusion in the study .....	37
Accessing study participants .....	38
Study participants .....	39
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	41
PRESENTING THE STUDY FINDINGS .....	43
<b>CHAPTER FOUR:</b>	
<b>THE BODY AWARE OF ITSELF .....</b>	<b>45</b>
THE BODY OUT OF CONTROL .....	46
THE IMPACT OF TREATMENT REGIMES .....	55
SUMMARY AND REVIEW .....	61
<b>CHAPTER FIVE:</b>	
<b>THE IMPACT OF THE BODY ON RELATIONSHIPS .....</b>	<b>63</b>
WITH DISTRICT NURSES .....	63
WITH OTHER HEALTH PROFESSIONALS .....	68
FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS .....	71
OTHER RELATIONSHIPS .....	74
SUMMARY AND REVIEW .....	76

**CHAPTER SIX:**

<b>THE BODY IN TIME AND SPACE</b> .....	78
THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE .....	79
ALTERATIONS IN SPATIALITY .....	86
SUMMARY AND REVIEW .....	89

**CHAPTER SEVEN:**

<b>CONTINUING ON WITH LIFE</b> .....	92
<b>MINIMISING THE IMPACT OF THE ULCERS</b> .....	94
Accepting the ulcers as a fact of life .....	94
Retaining hope .....	95
Developing confidence in health professionals .....	96
Establishing new routines and modifying old regimes .....	97
Retaining control of the situation .....	99
Keeping the ulcers in their place .....	101
Keeping the ulcers in perspective .....	103
<b>COMING TO TERMS WITH THE INITIAL ULCER</b> .....	104
<b>OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY</b> .....	107

**CHAPTER EIGHT:**

<b>DISCUSSION</b> .....	111
<b>THE MANAGEMENT OF LEG ULCERS</b> .....	112
<b>COMPLIANCE WITH TREATMENT REGIMES</b> .....	115
<b>LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY</b> .....	119
<b>AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH</b> .....	122
<b>CONCLUDING STATEMENT</b> .....	126

**REFERENCES** ..... 128

**APPENDICES**

APPENDIX A: Technical Glossary ..... 140

APPENDIX B: Information Sheet for District Nurses ..... 142

APPENDIX C: Introductory letter to potential participants ..... 144

APPENDIX D: Information Sheet for Study Participants ..... 145

APPENDIX E: Consent Form for Study Participants ..... 147