

## Val Voigt: A 13 year Venous leg ulcer odyssey

Val Voigt, 74, from Tanunda, near Adelaide in South Australia, suffered in excruciating pain for 13 years before she finally received the proper treatment her wounds required to heal.



The married mother of two, now living in Tanunda Lutheran Nursing Home, suffered from chronic Venous ulcers on both her legs, which were further complicated by cellulitis or infection. In practice this meant that the wounds would temporarily get better whenever treated, before the infection returned over subsequent weeks. This caused the ulcers to spread from her feet to her knees.



“The difficulty with Venous ulcers and cellulitis is that once they are there, they stay there without proper treatment” explains Adelaide based wound management nurse Tal Ellis, who was responsible for Val’s limb saving treatment. “Chronic Venous ulcers can be treated with special bandaging but if the infection remains the wounds simply flare up again”

The pain from her wounds was so great that it was keeping Val awake at nights, and was only controllable with Morphine. She was often bedridden and has been unable to walk for the last 3 years. Unsurprisingly Val also suffered from depression for many years. It wasn't until Tal Ellis was called to attend to Val by the vigilant staff at Tanunda Lutheran Nursing Home that she finally received the treatment she so badly needed.



Tal treated the condition in partnership with the nursing home staff and Val's General Practitioner. The treatment regime involved long term antibiotics and high compression therapy which is a special type of bandaging. The treatment also involved foam dressings containing silver underneath the compression bandages, which helped to control the infection and leakage from the wound. The bandage and dressings were initially changed three times a week, which soon reduced to twice a week. Most importantly of all, Tal and the staff provided psychological reassurance to Val that, despite the initial discomfort, she would get better. In conjunction with his regular visits he also provided support and direction to the nursing home staff.



The treatment began in May of last year and Val's wounds have now healed more or less completely. With Tal's help, Val now has a chance to walk again.

In a way Val was lucky. Proactive support by the staff at Tanunda Lutheran nursing home meant that Val eventually received the treatment she needed. However failure to properly diagnose and treat the problem 13 years ago meant that years were wasted before she received the appropriate treatment. Critical to the problem are a general lack of awareness of the problem of chronic wounds not healing, a lack of knowledge of modern and appropriate treatment being available and insufficient capacity among many healthcare professionals to make the right diagnosis.



May 2006



January 2007

Each dressing change over the first 5 weeks cost approximately \$500 – all of which Val and the Tanunda Lutheran homes paid for because Val was in a nursing home and not a public hospital or the community where treatment would have been Medicare funded and dressings supplied at no charge to her

There is also a tragic cost barrier to this treatment, which can initially be very expensive. In the first 6 weeks of Val's treatment, over \$5500 was spent on dressings alone. The total cost of Val recovering was approximately \$15,000, all of which she, her family and Tanunda Lutheran homes had to pay for simply because she was in residential care rather than a public hospital.

Tens of thousands of Australia's elderly community, just like Val, are living with wounds for years - many of them in very poor health and pain. This terrible problem is being caused by a lack of awareness of the health problem wounds represent, insufficient Medicare funding for non-hospital treatment of a condition which affects the oldest and sometimes poorest members of the community, plus inadequate understanding of the issue and appropriate treatment methods by many healthcare workers.

That's why the Australian Wound Management Association ([www.awma.com.au](http://www.awma.com.au)) has organised Wound Awareness Week - a campaign running from Monday 26-Friday 30

March 2007 dedicated to raising awareness of the enormous human cost imposed by wounds throughout Australia. The week draws together the community and experts from across the entire healthcare profession to compel the government to make a change. Groundbreaking surgeon and Australian of the Year Dr Fiona Wood is supporting the efforts of the Australian Wound Management Association as they try to raise public and professional awareness of wounds as significant health problem.

Val will celebrate her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2007. Thankfully it will be far happier than ones she has experienced in previous years.

**For more information about Wound Awareness Week, go to the Australian Wound Management Association website: [www.awma.com.au](http://www.awma.com.au)**

**For more information regarding Tal Ellis and his work go to:  
[www.woundhealaustralia.com](http://www.woundhealaustralia.com) or email – [woundheal@optusnet.com.au](mailto:woundheal@optusnet.com.au)**