

Lymphedema Education, Treatment Protocol and Reimbursement

Care varies across the country and within provincial jurisdictions

Common questions encountered while travelling across Canada as an educator of lymphedema and presenting to health professionals and patients.

By Martina Reddick

Q Should patients be offered MLD as the single treatment option?

A Although MLD might be indicated as part of the individual treatment plan for lymphedema, current research literature does not support that volume reduction can be achieved with MLD alone. However, there is strong evidence that compression bandaging reduces edema. Patients should have a thorough assessment and explanation of all the treatment options available to them, such as MLD in combination with compression bandaging and/or compression pumps and compression garments. Exercise is another component that has proven effective. Any treatment plan should include the patient in the discussions and be based on the assessment and individual patient goals.

Q Why does the curriculum vary between lymphedema schools that are teaching lymphedema therapists?

A Lymphedema education is generally provided by independent, privately owned and managed schools that are not part of our publicly supported educational or healthcare systems. Such schools are not accredited or regulated by public institutional standards

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and therefore their core curriculum is at the sole discretion of the individual school and Program Director and based on their own clinical experience. The Lymphology Association of North America (LANA) is a non-profit corporation composed of health care professionals in the field of lymphology. Although not a regulatory body, their purpose is to establish and maintain certification for health professionals that provide lymphedema services.

LANA's recommendation to meet the requirements of the

Complete Decongestive Therapy course is 135 hours or greater. Most private schools in Canada follow or exceed the LANA educational recommendations. The North American Lymphedema Education Association (NALEA) is an alliance of four private lymphedema therapy certification schools that are also trying to set and maintain high standards for education. The Canadian Lymphedema Framework (CLF) has recently published a Position Document on standards for certified lymphedema therapists

Q Why are some patients required to pay privately for lymphedema treatment while for others it is covered by health care?

A Lymphedema treatment is covered for some patients by their health care authority depending on the province in which they live. *The Canada Health Act* deems that essential physician and hospital care be covered by the publicly funded system, but each province has some license to determine what is considered essential, and where, how and who should provide the services. The result is that there is wide variability in what is covered across the country by the public health system, particularly in areas such as physiotherapy and assistive medical devices. Some provinces cover the costs related to either compression garments or complete decongestive therapy for both primary and secondary lymphedema, while other provinces provide no coverage at all and subsequently the patient is required to pay privately for treatment. Many community/home care nurses throughout Canada are treating chronic edema/lymphedema effectively with compression bandaging alone.

Some health care authorities have recognized the need and provide funding for lymphedema management. Positive reimbursement changes have recently been announced in Alberta and Quebec in regards to lymphedema coverage. For specific details on what is covered in your respective province please contact your local provincial lymphedema association. **LP**



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