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The occasional varicose ulcer

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Occam's razor states we should not multiply our phenomena. It is a useful principle in clinical diagnosis that, when one explanation fits a seemingly disparate set of signs and symptoms, it is more likely to be right than multiple explanations for the same set. A corollary would be that when there are many different treatments for the same condition, none is likely to be perfectly right. There is, after all, only one way to cure appendicitis (notwithstanding the experience of a certain Montreal Canadiens goalie several Stanley Cup Series ago).

All treatments of varicose ulcers of the lower extremities involve some sort of compression to relieve stasis and excessive pressure within the vein. Placing an Unna's boot is a time-honoured method to accomplish this. Several other methods have since evolved, none, though, gaining the grace of absolute truth. I still find this method as good as any other, although it does take time. In rural medicine, time is best wasted with patients you like, so I often look forward to a chat when I apply an Unna's boot.

I assume the reader has already properly diagnosed a varicose ulcer, excluding marked arterial insufficiency, infection, cancers and other strange beasties. Here's what you need:

Formula

- a piece of petroleum jelly gauze (Adaptic)

- 2 rolls of dry gauze wrap (i.e., 4-inch Kling)
- 2 boxes of zinc oxide impregnated gauze (Viscopaste)
- 1 elastic bandage (Ace bandage)
- some tape



Fig. 1

A suitable varicose ulcer in the medial malleolus area.



Fig. 2

Place the petroleum gauze over the ulcer.



Fig. 3

Wrap the lower leg with the dry gauze.


Fig. 4

Follow with 2 layers of the zinc oxide gauze, much like putting on a cast, starting from the distal end, from foot to upper calf. Cover with 4-inch Kling.


Fig. 5

Cover with the elastic bandage, again with snug compression.


Fig. 6

Tape securely in place. Warn about arterial compromise.

Patients can walk with this dressing because it is flexible. They should return in 2 weeks for a new one, or before if it unravels or if there is a lot of serious drainage from the ulcer. Be patient. This technique will heal most stasis ulcers no matter how large although it may take many weeks. I wonder if Unna and Occam were related?

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