

# Clinical inertia in chronic wound care

Chronic wounds, defined as wounds that fail to progress through the normal stages of healing, represent a growing global health challenge with profound clinical, social, and economic implications (Frykberg and Banks, 2015). The burden of chronic wounds is multifaceted, affecting not only patients' quality of life but also straining healthcare systems worldwide. These wounds are associated with prolonged morbidity, increased risk of infections and higher mortality rates, especially in patients with comorbidities such as diabetes and peripheral vascular disease (Mahmoudi and Gould, 2020).

Globally, chronic wounds impact millions of individuals, with estimates suggesting that up to 2% of the population in developed countries will experience a chronic wound during their lifetime. The prevalence is even higher in ageing populations, where comorbidities such as diabetes and obesity exacerbate the risk of non-healing wounds (Sen, 2019). The financial burden is equally staggering; in the US alone, chronic wound care is estimated to cost between \$28 billion and \$31 billion annually, not accounting for indirect costs, such as lost productivity and long-term disability (Sen, 2019).

Low-resource settings bear a disproportionate share of this burden, with limited access to advanced wound care technologies and a reliance on traditional, often suboptimal, treatment methods. This disparity contributes to poorer outcomes and highlights the urgent need for global strategies that address these inequalities (Haesler, 2023).

The escalating costs associated with chronic wound management are compounded by systemic challenges, including clinical inertia, a lack of standardised diagnostic protocols and insufficient education for healthcare providers. Clinical inertia, the failure to initiate or escalate treatment despite clear indications, remains a significant barrier, hindering timely interventions and contributing to suboptimal outcomes (Harding and Queen, 2019).

In response to these challenges, the Applied Wound Management (AWM) Chronic Wounds Global Advisory Council convened on 17 and 18 November 2024, bringing together a diverse panel of experts to discuss the pressing issues in chronic wound care and propose actionable solutions. This report summarises the key discussions and recommendations from the meeting, emphasising that while the challenges are substantial, they are not insurmountable. A unified, evidence-based approach is essential to accelerate healing, optimise resource use

and enhance patient quality of life. To achieve this, both systemic and psychological barriers must be addressed, paving the way for a more effective and sustainable model of chronic wound care.

Discussions on day one revealed the need for standardised terminology to enhance diagnostic consistency and data comparability, since variability in wound classification and reporting across regions impacts both research and practice. The panel acknowledged that tools such as the TIME/TIMERS framework (Atkin and Tettelbach, 2019), while widely referenced, are underutilised in daily clinical workflows.

The panel also recognised the need to align treatment plans with patient preferences and lifestyles, noting that shared decision-making and patient engagement are key to improving outcomes. Barriers such as low health literacy and the complexity of treatment regimens can make this difficult.

It was noted that emerging technologies, like AI and smart wound care products, could help bridge knowledge gaps and enhance treatment outcomes. Yet, while technology holds promise, its integration must complement rather than replace clinical expertise, especially as technology can be limited by regulatory, privacy and infrastructure concerns.

On day two, the complexity of chronic wound care and the persistent gap between guidelines and real-world practice were highlighted. An emerging theme was the potential role of 'implementation science' as a means to ensure theoretical best practices are not only accessible but actionable in real-world settings.

The panel recommended updates to the TIME/TIMERS framework to incorporate broader diagnostic considerations. The potential of a risk stratification tool to predict and mitigate the risk of non-healing wounds was also evaluated, with refinements advised to ensure clinical utility, validity and integration into workflows.

## Dr Leanne Atkin

PhD MHSc (ANP) RGN  
Research Fellow/Vascular Nurse Consultant, School of Human and Health Sciences, University of Huddersfield and Mid Yorkshire NHS Teaching Trust, UK.

## Prof Sebastian Probst

DClinPrac, MNS, RN,  
Professor of Tissue Viability and Wound Care; HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland, Geneva, Switzerland;  
Care Directories, Geneva University Hospitals, Geneva, Switzerland;  
Faculty of Medicine, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland;  
College of Medicine Nursing and Health Sciences, University of Galway, Galway, Ireland;  
Faculty of Medicine Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University, Clayton Campus, Clayton, Victoria, Australia.

## Key words

- Chronic wound care
- Patients' quality of life
- Healthcare challenges
- Meeting report

## Declaration

This meeting report has been supported by an unrestricted educational grant from Smith & Nephew

Urgent action is needed to improve outcomes and establish a unified, efficient and patient-centred approach to chronic wound care. With collective effort, informed by evidence and driven by a shared commitment to the future of chronic wound care, it will be possible to change outcomes for the better. This article explores the key themes discussed by the panel in more detail, while laying the groundwork for a series of subsequent articles that will explore targeted solutions to these challenges.

### Barriers in chronic wound care

The panel identified several barriers to effective chronic wound care, which are detailed below. Discussions revealed that these barriers are not only multifaceted but also deeply interconnected, highlighting how challenging it is to provide consistent, high-quality chronic wound care – particularly against a backdrop of unprecedented healthcare system pressures.

#### Lack of a robust evidence base due to inconsistent reporting of wound care data

One critical issue identified by the panel is lack of reliable wound care data. There is variation in how chronic wounds are defined and classified across regions and healthcare systems, and in how such data are collected and reported, which makes it difficult to build a robust evidence base. This, in turn, limits development of effective care protocols.

For example, the term ‘chronic wound’ is interpreted differently across countries; in some regions, any lower-limb wound in a diabetic patient is automatically categorised as a ‘diabetic foot ulcer’, even if it may actually be a pressure injury or another condition.

#### Delays to diagnosis and provision of appropriate care

Another recurring theme is delayed diagnosis, which can worsen the severity of chronic wounds and may lead to suboptimal treatment provision (Ahmajärvi et al, 2022). This is compounded by variability in global data reporting, as outlined above.

The panel noted many possible reasons for delayed diagnosis. Healthcare providers may lack the education and training necessary to provide a timely diagnosis – some are reluctant to provide a diagnosis due to concerns about making an error, while others rely on ‘guesswork’ rather than evidence-based assessments. There may also be limited access to standardised diagnostic tools, as well as an absence of reassessment processes, so treatment strategies remain stagnant rather than being updated as patients’ needs evolve.

These delays are further exacerbated by the deprioritisation of chronic wounds, inadequate communication among healthcare providers (e.g., between generalists and specialists), rigid hierarchical structures and patients’ own lack of knowledge or confidence to seek timely care.

#### Fragmentation of care

According to the panel, another significant challenge is fragmentation of care, with lack of standardisation across wound care protocols, practices and practical tools undermining efforts to deliver optimal care and prolonging healing times. Moreover, wounds are often addressed as a standalone concern rather than as an important part of the patient’s broader health picture.

This fragmentation manifests in several ways:

- Lack of access to standardised tools for wound assessment.
- Lack of clear wound care referral pathways.
- Regional disparities in access to wound care expertise, education and products (which leaves community care settings – often the frontline of wound management – particularly vulnerable).
- Varied priorities and goals amongst patients, caregivers and suppliers.

The panel noted that involvement of multiple stakeholders, including nurses, doctors, patients, caregivers and product suppliers, each with different priorities and perspectives, makes it difficult to address the barriers already mentioned above.

#### Lack of quality education and training

The panel consistently noted that insufficient education and training – both for healthcare professionals and patients – is a key barrier to optimal chronic wound care. Current approaches to teaching in wound care do not adequately prepare healthcare providers, while opportunities for continuous professional development are limited. Patient education is also a priority, with a need to improve health literacy and encourage greater involvement in care decisions.

Lack of high-quality education means many clinicians operate without access to targeted education or advanced wound care knowledge, meaning they are ill-equipped to manage complex cases, are forced to rely on outdated methods and are unable to make timely, informed decisions.

#### Strategies for systemic improvement in chronic wound care

The panel proposed the following actionable

#### Key barriers to chronic wound care.

- Lack of a robust evidence base, due to inconsistent data reporting
- Delays to diagnosis and provision of appropriate care
- Fragmentation of care and an absence of standardised practices and protocols
- Lack of high-quality education and training for healthcare professionals and patients.

### Strategies for systemic improvement in chronic wound care.

- Improve education and training, the cornerstone of effective wound care provision
- Standardise terminology, protocols and best practices across regions and healthcare systems
- Enhance patient engagement and shared decision-making
- Strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration, creating a unified approach that prioritises patient-centred care.

recommendations to address barriers in chronic wound care and facilitate the adoption of best practices.

#### Improve education and training

The panel emphasised that education and training are foundational to effective wound care. Developing robust, scalable education programmes tailored to the needs of community care settings is critical for addressing information gaps and fostering collaboration. The redistribution of knowledge to generalists and nurses in community settings – often at the forefront of wound care provision – will be particularly important.

The panel recommended developing simplified communication tools – such as plain language summaries, visual aids and tiered learning pathways – to help generalist nurses and non-specialists understand challenging topics like wound healing mechanisms and treatment aetiologies. Tools that address the complexities of wound care products and guidelines will equip providers with the knowledge required for informed decision-making, thereby reducing misdiagnoses, diagnostic delays and suboptimal care provision.

Partnerships with industry stakeholders and the considered use of technology may be necessary to fund and sustain these innovative educational initiatives. While technology can help address knowledge gaps, the panel cautioned against over-reliance, advocating instead for a balanced approach that preserves clinical expertise and ensures personalised care.

#### Standardise terminology, protocols and best practices

Standardising wound care terminology, protocols and practices was identified as a priority to streamline workflows, reduce variability and improve care consistency.

The introduction of globally recognised definitions for chronic wounds, combined with consistent data collection mechanisms that account for regional variations, could enhance diagnostic accuracy and care coordination. Establishing clear referral pathways was also highlighted as a strategy to minimise delays and improve alignment across care levels.

#### Enhance patient engagement and shared decision-making

Engaging and empowering patients through education and shared decision-making is essential for improving outcomes. The panel recommended aligning care plans with patients' individual goals and lifestyles to

encourage adherence and collaboration, regardless of whether the objective is wound management or complete healing.

Tailored educational materials and structured communication tools, such as checklists, were suggested to simplify complex treatment regimens and foster active patient participation. By aligning patient education materials with standardised practices, the panel noted that patient understanding and adherence to treatment plans could be further improved.

#### Strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration

The panel stressed the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in chronic wound care, emphasising that coordinated efforts between clinicians, caregivers and patients are essential to achieving holistic, patient-centred care.

Regular team meetings, workshops and resource-sharing were recommended to enhance communication and alignment amongst stakeholders. Establishing structured frameworks for knowledge-sharing and collaborative decision-making was also proposed as a means to improve care consistency, reduce diagnostic delays and foster better outcomes.

#### Targeting clinical inertia: behavioural change as a central solution

Globally, healthcare systems struggle to provide consistent, expert care for chronic wounds due to a lack of knowledge, services and evidence supporting many interventions. Yet, while innovation is clearly needed and recommendations for change have been explored extensively, change remains slow. One reason for this may be the pervasiveness of clinical inertia (Harding and Queen, 2019).

While the proposed strategies above offer a strong foundation for improvement, many barriers to improving chronic wound care appear to be deeply rooted in clinical inertia – a resistance to change driven by reliance on familiar routines, fear of unfamiliar methods, and a lack of confidence in implementing advanced protocols. Indeed, clinical inertia is a major factor contributing to inadequate care for many chronic diseases (O'Connor et al, 2005).

To address these behavioural concerns, the panel highlighted the need for targeted interventions, including tailored education programmes, simplified workflows and structured support systems designed to empower clinicians to adopt and sustain evidence-based practices confidently and consistently.

Behavioural change is equally critical for patients, as their active engagement in care is essential for achieving positive outcomes. Many patients struggle with low health literacy, making it difficult to understand and follow care plans. Closing these gaps through education and shared decision-making will help to foster a collaborative relationship between patients and providers, promoting adherence and improving overall outcomes.

The panel further advocated for the integration of implementation science as a pragmatic means of translating knowledge into practice. Experience demonstrates that establishing the effectiveness of a clinical innovation is not enough to ensure its use; implementation science aims to bridge the gap between research and practice by testing strategies to integrate evidence-based innovations into widespread use (Bauer and Kirshner, 2020).

A step-by-step, 'cookbook'-style approach was recommended to simplify the application of best practices. By embedding these implementation strategies within existing clinical guidelines and presenting them in accessible, clear language, such resources could better meet the needs of diverse healthcare providers – from non-specialists to seasoned practitioners – ensuring they are actionable, scalable and widely applicable.

### Conclusion and next steps

The challenges identified by the AWM panel are significant, yet resolvable. Addressing the psychological and systemic barriers impeding progress provides an opportunity to establish a cohesive approach that ultimately accelerates healing, optimises resource utilisation and improves patient quality of life. Achieving this transformation will require a collective,

evidence-driven effort based on a shared commitment to advancing the field of chronic wound care.

This article marks the beginning of a series dedicated to exploring these critical issues in depth. Subsequent articles will examine the primary barriers identified by the panel, including knowledge deficits, resource limitations and obstacles to implementing best practices. Each publication will present practical, evidence-based solutions designed to empower stakeholders across healthcare sectors. By providing actionable strategies focused on behavioural change, education and systemic reform, this series aims to foster meaningful advancements in chronic wound care, paving the way for a more effective, sustainable, and patient-centred model of care. ●

### References

- Ahmajärvi K, Isoherranen K, Venermo M (2022) Cohort study of diagnostic delay in the clinical pathway of patients with chronic wounds in the primary care setting. *BMJ Open* 12(11): e062673
- Atkin L, Tettelbach W (2019) TIMERS: expanding wound care beyond the focus of the wound. *Br J Nurs* 28(20): S34–7
- Bauer M, Kirchner J (2020) Implementation science: What is it and why should I care? *Psychiatry Res* 283: 112376
- Frykberg RG, Banks J (2015) Challenges in the treatment of chronic wounds. *Adv Wound Care* 4(9): 560–82
- Haesler E (2023) Local resource wound treatments: evidence summaries for resource-limited settings. *Wounds International* 14(2): 16–22
- Harding K, Queen D (2019) Innovation and inertia in wounds. *Int Wound J* 16(5): 1079
- Mahmoudi M, Gould L (2020) Opportunities and challenges of the management of chronic wounds: a multidisciplinary viewpoint. *Chronic Wound Care Manage Res* 2020(7): 27–36
- O'Conner PJ, Sperl-Hillen JM, Johnson PE et al (2005) Clinical inertia and outpatient medical errors. In: Henriksen K, Battles JB, Marks ES, et al (eds). *Advances in Patient Safety: From Research to Implementation (Volume 2: Concepts and Methodology)*. Rockville, Maryland: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK20513> (accessed 18.02.2025)
- Sen C (2019) Human wounds and its burden: an updated compendium of estimates. *Adv Wound Care (New Rochelle)* 8(2): 39–48



# From inertia to action: how to drive behavioural change in chronic wound care

Chronic wounds are a growing global concern with substantial clinical, economic and social impacts (Frykberg and Banks, 2015). These wounds disproportionately affect individuals with comorbidities such as diabetes and vascular diseases, and pose a serious burden to healthcare systems, especially in ageing populations (Sen, 2019). This article examines the mechanisms behind behavioural change in wound care, exploring how clinicians, patients and organisations can move from knowledge to action by understanding what motivates or hinders change.

The Applied Wound Management Chronic Wounds Global Advisory Council convened in November 2024 to discuss the pressing issues facing chronic wound care and propose actionable solutions (published in *Wounds International*, March 2025). The AWM Advisory panel highlighted several challenges:

1. Lack of a robust evidence base due to inconsistent reporting of wound care data
2. Delays to diagnosis and provision of appropriate care, compounded by variability in data reporting
3. Lack of standardisation across wound care protocols, practices and practical tools, and
4. Lack of high-quality education and training for wound care professionals

The pervasiveness of clinical inertia—resistance to adopting new practices even when evidence supports change—was identified as a major impediment in the face of these challenges (Harding and Queen, 2019). While evidence-based guidelines provide a rational path forward for the clinician, behavioural choice, driven by both internal motivations and external pressures, ultimately determines whether change actually happens.

With this in mind, this article shifts the focus to the mechanisms behind behavioural change in wound care, exploring how clinicians, patients and organisations can move from knowledge to action by understanding what motivates or hinders change.

## Barriers to change: Going beyond knowledge in wound care practice

Despite advances in clinical knowledge, outdated wound care practices are widespread—for example, wet-to-dry dressings continue to be used, even though evidence supports more effective alternatives (Fleck, 2009). This disconnect between knowledge and implementation may

be attributed to several barriers, identified by the Advisory panel:

1. **Comfort with familiar practices:** Established routines provide a sense of reliability and safety, both for clinicians and patients. As a result, newer methods may be met with scepticism or hesitation, particularly if perceived as complex, even when evidence-based. Broader organisational or societal norms may also reinforce the use of outdated practices.
2. **Fragmented systems and inconsistent protocols:** Variation in protocols, terminology and training across different settings leads to fragmentation of care. This makes it difficult to implement unified standards and best practices, particularly when patients transition between services or providers.
3. **Lack of standardised metrics:** Inconsistent documentation and a lack of clear wound healing metrics make it hard to see whether treatments are working. Without reliable outcome data, identifying what constitutes progress—or poor care—also becomes challenging.
4. **Limited clinical confidence:** Generalist clinicians and nurses may lack the confidence to apply advanced wound care protocols, make diagnoses or interpret wound status, preferring to defer to specialists. This creates bottlenecks and may delay timely interventions.
5. **Education gaps and access challenges:** Training is often insufficient, overly theoretical or difficult to access. Combined with time pressures and competing clinical demands, this makes it challenging for clinicians to update knowledge or gain practical skills.
6. **Workforce turnover and knowledge loss:** High staff turnover results in a continuous need for retraining and reorientation. Knowledge gaps caused by these transitions undermine consistency and contribute to a cycle of recurring behavioural inertia.

## Dr Leanne Atkin

PhD MHS (ANP) RGN  
Research Fellow/Vascular  
Nurse Consultant, School  
of Human and Health  
Sciences, University of  
Huddersfield and Mid  
Yorkshire NHS Teaching  
Trust, UK

## Prof Sebastian Probst

DClinPrac, MNS, RN,  
Professor of Tissue  
Viability and Wound  
Care; HES-SO University  
of Applied Sciences and  
Arts Western Switzerland,  
Geneva, Switzerland;  
Care Directories, Geneva  
University Hospitals,  
Geneva, Switzerland;  
Faculty of Medicine,  
University of Geneva,  
Geneva, Switzerland;  
College of Medicine  
Nursing and Health  
Sciences, University of  
Galway, Galway, Ireland;  
Faculty of Medicine  
Nursing and Health  
Sciences, Monash  
University, Clayton  
Campus, Clayton, Victoria,  
Australia

## Maria Collins-Donnelly

HCPC Registered  
Counselling Psychologist,  
Collins-Donnelly  
Consultancy, UK

## Key words

- Chronic wound care
- Patients' quality of life
- Healthcare challenges
- Meeting report

## Declaration

This meeting report has been supported by an unrestricted educational grant from Smith & Nephew

Recognising and addressing these barriers will be essential to fostering a system where optimal wound care becomes the standard. Yet, these barriers are not just operational — they are shaped by how people think, feel and behave in clinical settings. To address them meaningfully, it is important to understand the psychological forces that underpin them.

### The psychology behind behavioural barriers: what drives clinical inertia?

Clinical decisions are rarely the result of rational thought alone. “Rationality” in medicine refers to making decisions that best support patient health by thoughtfully weighing the potential benefits and harms of different actions. However, medical decisions are often not fully rational — poor outcomes persist, driven by decision-making that violates key principles of rationality (Djulfbegovic et al, 2017).

Instead, they are shaped by a continuous interplay of internal and external triggers. Internal triggers include cognitive factors like cognitive dissonance (Klein, 2019), fear of clinical error, a leading factor influencing patient safety (Boyer et al, 2024), thinking patterns, core beliefs and cognitive overload; and emotional states, such as burnout and stress resulting from moral injury (violations of the clinicians’ moral code outside of their control) (Mewborn et al, 2023), and feelings of being overwhelmed, frustrated, uncertain and lacking in confidence to name a few. In addition, the physical symptoms associated with these emotional states, plus exhaustion, pain or physical illness, can also have an impact.

These internal triggers do not directly determine clinical outcomes but instead can shape the context in which decisions are made, thus influencing clinicians’ day-to-day decision making and their ability to initiate, sustain or adapt wound care practices, and the same can be true for external triggers. Clinician’s personal circumstances — such as financial pressures and family dynamics — can create pressures that have an undesirable impact on continuity of care, availability of wound care services and workloads (Gray et al, 2019).

Workplace and organisational pressures including inadequate education and knowledge and limited resources also impact holistic care, with practice often based on experience, personal preference and colleague opinions, rather than on research evidence (Welsh, 2017). Other factors such as caseloads, expectations, time pressures and understaffing also add to the context in which clinicians are operating. Team dynamics, such as unresolved conflict, a low degree of support, or more destructive behaviours like bullying can also lead to negative consequences for patient care

#### Internal triggers include ...

... emotional responses like fear of making mistakes, frustration when wounds fail to improve, or a sense of helplessness due to lack of understanding. These feelings may drive clinicians toward familiar routines, even if they are not evidence-based. Deep-seated beliefs—for example, that frequent dressing changes equate to better care—can override newer guidance, especially when habits, formed under intense pressure, have become automatic. When combined with fatigue or stress, they often take priority over thoughtful reflection

#### External influences include ...

... time pressures, resource constraints, or lack of specialist support, which all influence decision-making. In busy settings, clinicians may choose the fastest or most familiar option, rather than the most effective one. Social norms and local culture play a role too: if best practices are not modelled by peers, individual uptake is less likely. Feedback, either positive or negative, can also drive behavioural shifts; while environmental cues—like signage or equipment layout—can also subtly influence what actions are taken or avoided

(Kim et al, 2017).

In wound care, this dynamic might explain why evidence-based practices are not always implemented, even when clinicians are aware of them. A single clinical moment — such as assessing wound progress — could play out in very different ways depending on how these triggers interact and the clinician’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours in response to such triggers.

Yet, despite the complexity and influence of internal and external triggers, clinicians retain the capacity to act intentionally; it is ultimately the clinician’s choice, how they choose to think and act in response to situations and these ongoing triggers, informed by internal readiness and supported by the right kinds of external conditions, that drives meaningful and sustained clinical action. Yet we must not underestimate how difficult it can be to exercise that choice when faced with interacting internal and external triggers, especially those that directly relate to the workplace and their role. Thus, to make these choices and to address clinical inertia, clinicians must have access to high-quality research, improved pathways for collaboration, increased training, and access to standardised wound assessment protocols to support their decision-making (Vains and Finlayson, 2021), alongside systems that support the clinician as a whole and build their confidence.

Fostering a lifelong love of learning might help to build such clinical confidence, strengthen adaptability and reduce fear often associated with change. When learning is valued and curiosity nurtured, clinicians are likely to be better equipped to implement new knowledge effectively and cope with change (Holloway, 2024).

### Strategies to drive behavioural change

It is clear that sustainable change in chronic wound care requires more than disseminating

best practices; it demands strategies that address both the psychological triggers and external pressures that shape clinician decision-making. The following strategies are recommended to create the conditions for change, aligning with how decisions are made in real-world settings and addressing both the psychological and structural factors that influence clinician and patient behaviour.

#### **Reframe the objective**

Replacing terminology that reinforces passive or maintenance-based care — such as “managing” wounds — towards words that emphasise “healing” will help realign the focus across teams. This shift supports a more proactive and healing-oriented approach to care delivery.

#### **Suggested actions:**

- Replace “chronic wound management” with “chronic wound healing” in clinical materials and communications
- Highlight healing-focused language in training and patient discussions

#### **Empower informed decision-making**

Clinicians and patients alike will benefit from recognising their agency in care choices. Behavioural change begins with education that builds confidence, encourages accountability and reinforces the value of evidence-based actions. When individuals understand the “why” behind clinical recommendations, they are more likely to take ownership and act accordingly.

#### **Suggested actions:**

- Use decision aids that clarify roles and responsibilities in care pathways
- Offer communication tools that help patients understand and contribute to treatment plans

#### **Simplify to encourage adherence**

Overly complex protocols and guidelines can create confusion and discourage action, particularly under pressure. Breaking processes down into clear, manageable steps makes behaviours easier to adopt and maintain, especially for less experienced staff. Consistent and concise messaging across platforms further reduces cognitive load and improves retention of key practices.

- Redesign protocols and guidelines into easy-reference flowcharts or checklists
- Develop quick-reference resources about complex interventions tailored to specific roles (e.g., junior nurses, home carers)

#### **Incentivise positive behaviours**

Reinforcing desirable behaviours like following protocols and adopting best practices — through recognition, feedback or reward — helps embed them in routine practice. Even small incentives can

build momentum, especially when individuals and teams feel their efforts are seen and valued.

#### **Suggested actions:**

- Share local success stories or healing rate improvements to motivate teams
- Introduce peer recognition programmes that celebrate adherence to best practices

#### **Standardise protocols and language**

Disparities in terminology and practice lead to inconsistency and confusion. Implementing a shared framework for wound progression and codifying treatment pathways will promote alignment across care settings, enabling clearer communication, consistent decision-making and measurable outcomes.

#### **Suggested actions**

- Standardise ‘red flag’ definitions (e.g., lack of 30–40% wound reduction in three weeks) to trigger timely escalation
- Implement structured workflows for key stages of care (e.g., assessment, dressing selection)
- Monitor adherence to red flags and escalation protocols
- Use data dashboards to drive local accountability

#### **Make education practical and accessible**

Continuous learning must be integrated into everyday clinical routines, especially in settings affected by high staff turnover. Educational programmes should prioritise essential, actionable knowledge rather than exhaustive theory, focusing on real-world application and decision-making. Technology can enhance learning by delivering bite-sized training modules, decision-support tools or point-of-care apps that reinforce correct behaviour without overwhelming staff.

#### **Suggested actions:**

- Develop short, role-specific e-learning modules or microlearning tools
- Introduce onboarding pathways for new staff with embedded wound care standards
- Use tech-enabled learning to support on-the-job upskilling

#### **Provide real-time support at the point of care**

Not all clinicians have immediate access to wound care specialists. Virtual or AI-driven tools can offer real-time guidance, boosting confidence and enabling faster, more consistent care decisions. Embedding support into workflows could also reduce delays and improve confidence across care teams.

#### **Suggested actions:**

- Develop virtual consultations or “ask an expert”

### Case study: An illustrative example of how targeted behavioural change could improve chronic wound care outcomes.

A regional healthcare provider, responsible for wound care across multiple urban and rural clinics, identified significant variation in treatment approaches and outcomes. Despite access to clinical guidelines, chronic wounds were a significant concern across the region. Staff cited low clinical confidence, inconsistent protocols and high turnover as key barriers.

To address this, the provider implemented a behaviourally informed initiative aimed at promoting consistency and improving healing rates.

Actions included:

- Reframing language to focus on “healing” rather than “management,” shifting the underlying mindset
- Introducing simplified decision-support tools, such as flowcharts and clear red flag criteria
- Providing real-time support through virtual specialist consultations to assist generalist staff
- Tracking outcomes and giving teams regular feedback, coupled with informal recognition for success.

After six months, improvements were observed in documentation quality, engagement with evidence-based practices and overall healing outcomes. Staff confidence, particularly among generalist clinicians, also increased.



Scan the QR code above to access the recently published Best Practice Statement ‘Implementation of a validated non-healing wounds pathway in practice: learning from UK healthcare settings’ (Wounds UK, 2025)

services for generalist clinicians

- Enable easy escalation or referral pathways directly from frontline apps or platforms
- Integrate AI-based triage or diagnostic tools into electronic health systems

### Conclusion

The challenges facing chronic wound care cannot be addressed through knowledge alone. While protocols and best practices are essential, they will only translate into consistent action when effective behavioural change strategies are embedded into the systems, environments and cultures where care is delivered.

Understanding the internal and external triggers that influence decision-making — such as habits, beliefs, peer dynamics and system pressures — offers a powerful framework for driving change. Meaningful improvements come when structures are simplified, incentives are aligned, education is targeted and individuals are empowered to make informed, confident choices.

Indeed, when behavioural change strategies are effectively applied, the potential impact could be transformative:

- More consistent wound care delivery across teams and settings
- Fewer unnecessary or outdated interventions, reducing treatment burden
- Greater clinician confidence and engagement, particularly among generalists
- Improved patient experiences and healing outcomes
- The emergence of a culture of continuous improvement, where adapting and evolving become embedded in the system.

These outcomes represent more than operational wins — they reflect a shift in mindset, where healing becomes the shared priority and

each action is supported by both evidence and behaviourally informed design.

Overcoming clinical inertia in wound care requires thinking beyond “what should be done” to also focus on how change happens. It calls for integrating behavioural insights into every layer of the system — ultimately, making behavioural thinking central to innovation and implementation efforts in the wound care space. ●

### References

- Boyer L, Wu AW, Fernandes S et al (2024) Exploring the fear of clinical errors: associations with socio-demographic, professional, burnout, and mental health factors in healthcare workers – a nationwide cross-sectional study. *Front. Public Health* 12: 1423905
- Djulfbegovic B, Elgayam S, Dale W (2017) Rational decision-making in medicine: Implications for overuse and underuse. *J Eval Clin Pract* 24(3):655–665
- Fleck CA (2009) Why “Wet to Dry”? *J Am Col Certif Wound Spec* 1(4): 109–13
- Frykberg RG, Banks J (2015) Challenges in the treatment of chronic wounds. *Adv Wound Care* 4(9): 560–82
- Gray TA, Wilson P, Dumville JC et al (2019) What factors influence community wound care in the UK? A focus group study using the Theoretical Domains Framework. *BMJ Open* 9: e024859
- Harding K, Queen D (2019) Innovation and inertia in wounds. *Int Wound J* 16(5): 1079
- Holloway S (2024) The journey of lifelong learning in wound care—a road best taken. *Wounds UK* 20(2): 6–7
- Kim S, Bochatay N, Relyea-Chew A et al (2017) Individual, interpersonal, and organisational factors of healthcare conflict: A scoping review. *J Interprof Care* 31(3): 282–90
- Klein J, McColl G (2019) Cognitive dissonance: how self-protective distortions can undermine clinical judgement. *Med Educ* 53(12): 1178–86
- Mewborn EK, Fingerhood ML, Johanson L, Hughes V (2023) Examining moral injury in clinical practice: A narrative literature review. *Nurs Ethics* 30(7–8): 960–74
- Sen C (2019) Human wounds and its burden: an updated compendium of estimates. *Adv Wound Care (New Rochelle)* 8(2): 39–48
- Vains AS, Finlayson K (2022) How generalist nurses inform their clinical decision-making in wound management: a scoping review. *Wound Practice and Research* 30(2): 112–8
- Welsh L (2018) Wound care evidence, knowledge and education amongst nurses: a semi-systematic literature review. *Int Wound J* 15(1): 53–61



# Bridging the knowledge gap: empowering generalists to make better chronic wound care decisions

Improving chronic wound care requires more than clinical knowledge or updated guidelines: it calls for practical, system-wide changes that empower clinicians to act decisively at the point of care. While recent efforts have highlighted the need to overcome clinical inertia (Atkin and Probst, 2025a) and apply behavioural insights to support change (Atkin and Probst, 2025b), a persistent barrier remains: the disconnect between wound care knowledge and application, particularly for generalist healthcare providers. Bridging this gap means supporting generalists with practical, behaviourally informed strategies that foster confident decision-making without requiring specialist expertise (Atkin and Probst, 2025b). With the right tools and knowledge, and clear referral pathways, generalists could help to reduce delays, improve healing outcomes, and support more consistent outcomes.

Chronic wound care is frequently delivered by generalists—such as community nurses, general practitioners (GPs), aged care staff and allied health professionals—who manage diverse caseloads across primary care, aged care, and community health settings (Ahmajärvi et al., 2024; Monaro, 2021). Despite their central role, these providers may face significant barriers to delivering effective wound care.

Formal education is typically limited, even for basic wound care and management (Gould & Herman, 2025). Nurses lack adequate training in wound care clinical skills, with research suggesting a need for more specialised training in undergraduate and postgraduate nursing practice (Fernández-Araque et al., 2024). GPs may also be constrained by inadequate training, fragmented care pathways, and poor coordination with other services (Ahmajärvi et al., 2024). In recent years, some general practices in the UK have withdrawn or limited their provision of wound care services due financial pressures and increased demand on nursing.

This is set against the backdrop of a growing global wound care burden. In the UK alone, chronic wounds affect an estimated 1.5–2 million people, with annual treatment costs exceeding £5 billion (Guest et al, 2020). Globally, prevalence is rising due to ageing populations and increasing rates of diabetes and vascular disease (Frykberg and Banks, 2015; Sen, 2019). A recent Finnish cohort study identified that diagnostic delays beyond 42 days significantly prolonged healing trajectories and were associated with higher healthcare resource use (Ahmajärvi et al, 2025).

## Why knowledge alone is not enough

Recent behavioural trials in Australia suggest that embedding micro-interventions such as “point-of-care nudges” in EMR systems can meaningfully reduce clinical inertia in wound management decisions. These interventions produced a 27% improvement in timely escalation over 6 months (Varela et al., 2025). Indeed, fear of making clinical errors, one of the primary influences on patient safety, can make clinicians more likely to stick with familiar practices, even when those practices are outdated or suboptimal. This fear is associated with guilt, shame, anxiety and depression amongst healthcare providers, extending beyond patient harm to include concerns about reputation and job security (Boyer et al., 2024).

In fact, research directly demonstrates that knowledge does not consistently translate into behaviour change. For example, a study of family medicine clinicians found varying degrees of this knowledge-behaviour gap even after educational interventions. This same study identified that only two conditions reliably promote clinical action based on knowledge: “level of certainty and sense of urgency” (Kennedy et al, 2004). Without these conditions, even well-informed clinicians may default to established routines, regardless of their knowledge base.

It is clear the knowledge-practice gap is not simply an educational problem, but a complex interplay of psychological, emotional and systemic factors that must be addressed through behavioural and organisational interventions, not just information dissemination.

## Dr Leanne Atkin

PhD MHSc (ANP) RGN  
Research Fellow/Vascular  
Nurse Consultant, School  
of Human and Health  
Sciences, University of  
Huddersfield and Mid  
Yorkshire NHS Teaching  
Trust, UK

## Prof Sebastian Probst

DClinPrac, MNS, RN,  
Professor of Tissue  
Viability and Wound  
Care; HES-SO University  
of Applied Sciences and  
Arts Western Switzerland,  
Geneva, Switzerland;  
Care Directories, Geneva  
University Hospitals,  
Geneva, Switzerland;  
Faculty of Medicine,  
University of Geneva,  
Geneva, Switzerland;  
College of Medicine  
Nursing and Health  
Sciences, University of  
Galway, Galway, Ireland;  
Faculty of Medicine  
Nursing and Health  
Sciences, Monash  
University, Clayton  
Campus, Clayton, Victoria,  
Australia

## Key words

- Chronic wound care
- Patients' quality of life
- Healthcare challenges
- Meeting report

## Declaration

This meeting report has been supported by an unrestricted educational grant from Smith & Nephew

To support generalists to deliver better chronic wound care, practical, behaviourally informed tools and support are needed to make evidence-based action the default choice, not the exception.

### **Bridging the gap: Best practice statement for empowering generalists**

Improving generalist performance in wound care does not require transformation into specialists. Instead, it requires creating conditions in which they can take timely, confident and appropriate action using simplified tools and clear pathways. The following best practice principles can help close the knowledge–practice gap:

#### **1. Focus on essential knowledge, not exhaustive education**

Deep, specialist-level knowledge is not the goal; actionable awareness is. Generalists need to be able to reliably recognise key wound types, identify red flags and know the first steps to take.

Essential knowledge for generalists includes:

- **Recognition of wound types:** such as diabetic foot ulcers, venous leg ulcers, and pressure injuries.
- **Understanding of red flag indicators:** including wounds that fail to improve by 30–40% within four weeks (venous leg ulcers or pressure ulcers), increasing exudate, odour, or signs of infection (Wounds UK, 2022).
- **Basic first-line interventions:** including appropriate dressing categories and indications for compression therapy or offloading.

#### **2. Simplify decision-making with embedded tools**

To be effective, clinical tools must be accessible, easy to use and embedded into everyday workflows. Rather than relying on memory or individual initiative, the system itself should prompt best practice.

Useful tools might include:

- **Wound assessment flowcharts:** visual aids that support initial wound classification and treatment planning.
- **Dressing selection guides:** providing stepwise recommendations based on wound characteristics.
- **Digital decision trees or apps:** integrated into electronic medical records or mobile platforms, offering real-time support at the point of care.

#### **3. Enable confident escalation and referral**

Timely escalation is one of the most critical elements of effective wound care, yet generalists may hesitate to escalate due to fear of overreacting, uncertainty about criteria, or lack of access to specialist teams. Establishing clear escalation frameworks with defined clinical criteria and communication pathways can support confident, appropriate decision-making and improve patient outcomes.

A clear escalation framework should include:

- **Defined clinical criteria:** such as stagnant healing, suspected infection, or signs of arterial compromise.
- **Structured referral pathways:** including digital referral forms, predefined triage timelines, and clear contact points.
- **Cultural reinforcement:** messaging that escalation reflects good practice, not clinician failure.

#### **4. Engage specialists within seven days of entry to care**

Early intervention is associated with faster healing, fewer amputations, and lower overall treatment costs (Sen, 2019; Frykberg & Banks, 2015). Setting a clear, system-wide benchmark—such as a seven-day target for specialist input—helps align teams and resources around early escalation.

The goal is to:

- Minimise diagnostic delays, which currently average 57 days, and associated complications or deterioration of wounds, which may require hospitalisation or advanced interventions. (Guest et al., 2020).
- Support generalist teams with timely feedback and specialist input.

### **From best practice to clinical practice**

Closing the gap between best practice guidance and real-world clinical practice requires more than distributing knowledge:

- Structured onboarding is a critical starting point. As staff rotate across services or enter new roles, they should be introduced early to the key elements of effective wound care, to ensure consistency from the outset: red flag criteria, escalation triggers and simplified decision aids.
- Digital solutions are another opportunity to support frontline decision-making. Prompts built into electronic medical records—such as reassessment alerts or escalation reminders when healing lags—could guide timely action without adding to cognitive load.
- At the team level, monitoring local data on escalation rates, response times, or healing outcomes provides valuable feedback



Scan the QR code above to access the recently published Best Practice Statement 'Implementation of a validated non-healing wounds pathway in practice: learning from UK healthcare settings' (Wounds UK, 2025)

for staff members. Dashboards that allow visualisation of this information can give real time feedback to teams and team members, highlighting areas of strength, signalling where further support is needed and keeping teams aligned on priorities.

- Finally, creating a culture that recognises good practice—whether through informal peer shout-outs or more structured feedback loops—can help to shift behaviour. Sharing short, local examples of positive outcomes following timely escalation or early intervention can help to build confidence and reinforce the message that proactive care leads to better results.

These changes are not about increasing workload. They are about designing environments that support the right actions, every time, by every clinician, so that evidence-based care becomes not only possible, but routine.

### Conclusion

Confidence, not complexity, should define chronic wound care. Empowering generalists to deliver better chronic wound care requires a shift in focus: from disseminating more information to designing tools and systems that support confident, evidence-based action.

Generalist providers do not need specialist-level expertise; they need clear guidance, timely feedback and accessible tools that simplify complex wound care decisions. Organisational levers, such as structured escalation policies, unit-level audit-feedback cycles and peer comparison dashboards, have proven effective in accelerating adoption of best-practice wound care models.

By embedding decision-support resources, defining escalation pathways and enabling

early specialist input, healthcare systems could reduce delays, improve healing outcomes and mitigate the rising burden of chronic wounds. ●

### References

- Ahmajärvi K, Magalhães S, Majchzak K et al (2024) The general practitioner's role in wound management. *J Wound Manage* 25(3): 118–9
- Atkin L, Probst S (2025a) Clinical inertia in chronic wound care. *Wounds International* 16(1): 48–51
- Atkin L, Probst S (2025b) From inertia to action: how to drive behavioural change in chronic wound care. *Wounds International* 16(2): 40–3
- Boyer L, Wu AW, Fernandes S et al (2024) Exploring the fear of clinical errors: associations with socio-demographic, professional, burnout, and mental health factors in healthcare workers – a nationwide cross-sectional study. *Front. Public Health* 12: 1423905
- Fernandez-Araque A, Martinez-Delgado M, Jimenez JM, et al (2024) Assessment of nurses' level of knowledge of the management of chronic wounds. *Nurse Education Today* 134: 106084
- Frykberg RG, Banks J (2015) Challenges in the treatment of chronic wounds. *Adv Wound Care* 4(9): 560–82
- Gould L and Herman I (2025) Out of the Darkness and Into the Light: Confronting the Global Challenges in Wound Education. *Int Wound J* 22(1): e70178
- Guest JF, Ayoub N, McIlwraith T et al (2015) Health economic burden that wounds impose on the National Health Service in the UK. *BMJ Open* 5(12): e009283
- Kennedy T, Regehr G, Rosenfield J et al (2004) Exploring the gap between knowledge and behavior: a qualitative study of clinician action following an educational intervention. *Acad Med* 79(5): 386–93
- Klein J, McCall G (2019) Cognitive dissonance: how self-protective distortions can undermine clinical judgement. *Med Educ* 53(12): 1178–86
- Monaro S, Pinkova J, Ko N et al (2021) Chronic wound care delivery in wound clinics, community nursing and residential aged care settings: A qualitative analysis using Levine's Conservation Model. *J Clin Nurs* 30(9–10): 1295–311
- O'Connor PJ, Sperl-Hillen JM, Johnson PE et al (2005) Clinical inertia and outpatient medical errors. In: Henriksen K, Battles JB, Marks ES, et al (eds). *Advances in Patient Safety: From Research to Implementation* (Volume 2: Concepts and Methodology). Rockville, Maryland: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK20513> (accessed 18.02.2025)
- Sen C (2019) Human wounds and its burden: an updated compendium of estimates. *Adv Wound Care (New Rochelle)* 8(2): 39–48
- Wounds UK (2022) *Best Practice Statement: Active Treatment of Non-healing Wounds in the Community*. Wounds UK, London. Available to download from: [www.wounds-uk.com](http://www.wounds-uk.com)