A PREVENTABLE DISASTER

You don’t have to be an expert in diabetes to help save a patient’s limb. Better training of non-specialists and improved foot care in all settings could stem the rising tide of amputations.

By Jennifer Trueland
When Ruth Miller looks at the latest figures on diabetes-related foot amputations, she admits that her heart sinks a little. As Poole NHS Foundation Trust’s lead diabetes nurse, she knows the devastation the disease can wreak on people’s feet. Yet this message does not seem to be getting through.

‘There are some hospitals with very good services, and others less good,’ she says. ‘And the same goes for GP practices. I know services are stretched, but people should have their feet checked.

‘It’s important for the individual – complications can affect family relationships and ability to work. But it also makes sense for the NHS and the wider economy.’

Foot amputations
A recent Diabetes UK analysis of Public Health England data shows that about 20 foot amputations take place each day, and that numbers are increasing. The charity estimates that four in five of these amputations are preventable, but that people don’t have access to services such as a multidisciplinary specialist foot team.

There has been some improvement since Diabetes UK launched its Putting Feet First campaign in 2012, says the charity’s policy manager Nikki Joule. The rate of major amputations has fallen and more areas have introduced a proper diabetes care pathway, with a focus on feet. But this is far from universal, and access remains patchy.

‘We’re not asking everyone to become an expert. But we are demanding that they have basic care competencies.’

Ms Miller has focused on diabetes care, including foot care, at her trust. So far, about 1,000 acute staff, including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, doctors and nurses, have been trained in the basics of diabetes care, along with community nurses.

Training includes using the Ipswich Touch Test, which determines whether people have reduced sensation in their feet. There is also a version for patients to do at home at the Diabetes UK website.

Keeping it simple
The Poole Trust’s project also involves a 10-point training sheet, which gives a basic run-down of what staff need to know about diabetes, including foot care.

Qualitative research suggests the project has triggered a big improvement in staff confidence in looking after people with diabetes.
Case study: ‘Foot problems messed up my retirement’

Retired civil servant Robert Carew Hunt had type 2 diabetes diagnosed in 2002. A blood glucose test ordered by a vigilant practice nurse found his blood glucose levels were extremely high.

He already had an ulcer on his big toe, which later had to be amputated, as did another toe on the same foot.

Despite excellent care at St George’s Hospital, south London, Mr Carew Hunt continued to have problems with his feet and this year made the decision to have his left leg amputated below the knee.

‘I’d had problems with my right foot, and my left foot had always been my good foot,’ he says. ‘But I continued to get ulcers, and bouts of cellulitis, which as well as being very painful meant that I lost any progress I’d made with the foot.

‘By the time I decided to have the operation, it didn’t really feel like a foot, it was a swollen lump. The decision was a no-brainer, as I felt I’d be able to get about again.’

For the three years before the operation, Mr Carew Hunt’s mobility was severely restricted.

He describes his foot problems as having ‘messed up his retirement.’

‘Living with foot problems is very difficult, but I’ve been lucky with the care I’ve had,’ he says. ‘I know other people with diabetes who don’t even have access to specialist podiatry. It’s a real postcode lottery.’

After the operation, rehabilitation and the fitting of a prosthetic leg, Mr Carew Hunt is making good progress.

Facts on diabetes

» According to the latest analysis by Diabetes UK, the number of diabetes-related foot amputations in England has reached an all-time high of 20 per day.

» Public Health England figures show that the number of diabetes-related foot amputations is now 7,370 a year compared to the previous figure of 7,042, and the variation between the best and worst performing areas continues to widen.

» Diabetic foot disease remains the most common cause of diabetes-related hospital admission.

» Diabetes UK says that four out of five of diabetes-related foot amputations are preventable.

The Putting Feet First campaign has three main aims: that people with diabetes know how to look after their feet and what to expect from their health service; that local health services provide an integrated footcare pathway; and that healthcare professionals are more aware of the risk of diabetic foot disease and the need for annual checks.

There are 3.5 million people diagnosed with diabetes in the UK and an estimated 549,000 have the condition but don’t know it. Most of these have type 2 diabetes.