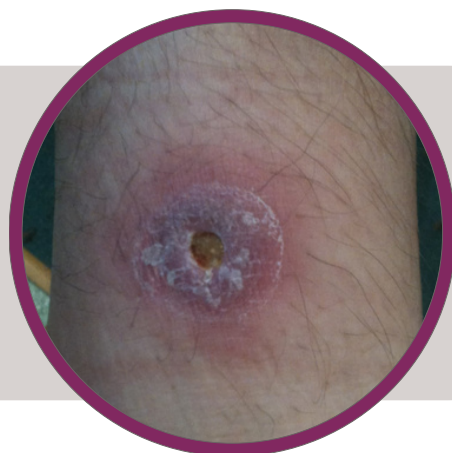


Barwon South West Public Health Unit

Mycobacterium ulcerans on the rise

Practical tips for diagnosis

Cases of *Mycobacterium ulcerans* (Buruli ulcer) from the Bellarine Peninsula, Geelong and Surf Coast continue to increase. As most present to medical practitioners during winter or spring, now is a good opportunity to add some practical tips for diagnosis.



- Not all cases are ulcers; up to 15% may present as non-ulcerative forms such as subcutaneous nodules, raised skin plaques or areas of cellulitis. Be wary of cellulitis presenting around joints such as the elbow, knee or wrist (including the back of the hand) in people with exposure to the endemic areas, especially if not responding to initial antibiotics.
- For the ulcerative form of disease, the diagnosis can usually be made easily with a dry swab under the edges of an ulcer (with visible lesion material on the swab) sent for *M. ulcerans* PCR which is highly sensitive. However, in the non-ulcerative cases described above, as the skin is not broken, the PCR of the surface will often be negative and give a false negative diagnosis. For non-ulcerative cases the best diagnostic approach is to do a biopsy of the lesion and send it for AFB stain, mycobacterial culture, histopathology and PCR. If the lesion is clinically suspicious for *M. ulcerans* and the PCR is negative suggest proceed to a punch biopsy.
- In anyone with an unusual or non-healing lesion of the skin or subcutaneous tissue who reports exposure to the endemic areas, think *M. ulcerans* as not all cases are classical in appearance.

Although current treatments for *M. ulcerans* achieve high rates of cure, they continue to evolve. We are still defining, by means of clinical experience and research, the best treatment options with respect to drug regimens, dosing schedules, the role of surgery and the management of immune reconstitution syndrome. Therefore we kindly request that all patients diagnosed with *M. ulcerans* are referred to the infectious diseases service at University Hospital Geelong for further assessment.

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