Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

Richard J B Willis
BUC Health Ministries Director

The story is familiar. In order to get among the flock of sheep the wolf had to don a fleece. Some medical conditions appear to work in a similar way, and one in particular – Lupus – fits the title perfectly.

Lupus is the Latin for a wolf and is the name given to a variety of skin conditions. The two chief types of Lupus are: L. vulgaris (due to the mycobacterium tuberculosis); and, L. erythematosus (which is largely of unknown origin). Around 50,000 people in the UK have Lupus and 90% of these are female. The condition affects people mainly between the ages of 15-55.

Describing Lupus as the wolf in sheep's clothing is more than appropriate as the symptoms of the illness mimic other diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis or multiple sclerosis. Lupus can be further defined to discoid Lupus (usually affecting only the skin) or systemic Lupus in which the body's immune system starts to attack itself (autoimmune disease), and these conditions are neither infectious nor contagious.

The symptoms of Lupus are vastly varied and include: Joint/muscle aches/pains; permanent rash over cheeks; kidney problems; extreme fatigue/weakness; oral/nasal ulcers; risk of miscarriage; hair loss; rashes on sunlight/UV light exposure; depression; flu-like symptoms and/or night sweats; internal tissue inflammation with chest and/or abdominal pain; poor circulation to tips of toes/fingers; blood disorders including anaemia; seizures, mental illness or other brain problems; headaches, and migraines.

A diagnosis of Lupus is made if 4 or 5 of the above symptoms are presented. The two major symptoms are the joint/muscle aches and pains, and the extreme fatigue and tiredness. As some of the symptoms recede, others may develop. Lupus can be triggered: at puberty; through sunlight; after viral infection; after childbirth; during the menopause; as a result of trauma; and after prolonged use of some medications.

As can be seen from the wide range of symptoms, where the diagnosis is made ultimately will depend on the particular presenting symptoms. Treatment will also vary considerably but will include choices from the following: NSAIDS (anti-inflammatory drugs such as Aspirin) for joint/muscle pain and those needing anticoagulants (where heparin or
warfarin/coumadin may be prescribed); Anti-malarials to help management of skin/joint involvement; steroids to counteract inflammation and suppress active disease; and, Immunosuppressants which are used when Lupus is severe. Whilst Lupus cannot be cured presently the monitored use of the above range of medications help to control the condition and for the person to have a fairly normal life.

get this article in .pdf format (click here)