

AREAS OF EXCELLENCE AT THE MCGILL UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTRE (MUHC): Lymphedema Program



“As a surgical oncologist, I have seen first-hand the devastating effect that cancer can have on patients. For those who overcome the disease, being diagnosed with lymphedema can be just as traumatic as their initial diagnosis. The McGill University Health Centre’s Lymphedema Program provides comprehensive information, as well as specialized support and rehabilitation services for those suffering from this debilitating condition.”

**Dr. Sarkis Meterissian,
Director of the MUHC’s
Breast Clinic**

The lymphatic system helps maintain an optimal balance of fluids in our bodies and is a vital part of the immune system. Lymphedema is a condition brought on by a compromised lymphatic system, common in patients who have undergone surgery, the removal of lymph nodes, or radiation therapy for the treatment of various cancers.

Characterized by localized and severe fluid retention and tissue swelling, left untreated, lymphedema can swell body parts up to three times their normal size, causing pain and producing large skin folds and elephantiasis. It can also cause permanent skin changes and serious bacterial skin infections. In severe cases, lymphedema can also lead to lymphangiosarcoma, a rare and deadly form of cancer. These symptoms are only the physical manifestation of the condition – the psycho-social effects of this disfiguring condition, including depression and anxiety, often have a profound impact on those afflicted.

Lymphedema can occur in any part of the body: the arms and shoulders, legs, trunk or abdomen. However, it is most often seen in breast cancer patients and for more than 80,000 Quebecers, this condition is a painful and debilitating daily reality.

Difficult to diagnose, lymphedema can develop several days or even years following a cancer treatment. There is no cure, and drug treatments for this chronic and progressive condition are generally ineffective, which leaves many patients at a loss as to how to manage their condition.

The MUHC Lymphedema Program – at the forefront of care

As the only specialized medical service for lymphedema care in Quebec, the MUHC’s Lymphedema Program is internationally recognized for its clinical, educational and research leadership. The program offers consultation, prevention, rehabilitation as well as education services, which are critical in facilitating the self-management of the condition. While treatment options for lymphedema include a number of decongestive therapies that can only be administered by specially trained therapists, compression bandaging is a skill that patients are taught at the clinic to keep the swelling and the condition at bay.

Its interdisciplinary team treats more than 1,000 patients annually and the program operates at two clinics within the MUHC: at the Breast Clinic under the leadership of Dr. Sarkis Meterissian, and at a dedicated clinic near the Glen site under the leadership of Dr. Anna Towers.

Dr. Sarkis Meterissian is a graduate of McGill University’s Faculty of Medicine and has been the Director of the MUHC’s Breast Clinic since 2006. As a surgical oncologist, Dr. Meterissian is dedicated to advancing new treatments in breast cancer that have the potential to reduce or eliminate the need to remove lymph nodes, which would ultimately lower the risk of lymphedema.

Lymphedema by the numbers:

- Estimated that one in five women develops lymphedema following breast cancer treatment
- Approximately 80,000 Quebecers are suffering from lymphedema
- More than 1,000 people visited the MUHC's lymphedema clinics during 2014 – hundreds more remain on a 5-6 month waiting list
- 7 lymphedema research projects underway in collaboration with McGill University

Leading the way for patients living with Lymphedema

The MUHC is truly setting the standard of care for cancer patients with lymphedema in Canada and around the world. However, the number of patients requiring care from our highly specialized interdisciplinary team is out-stripping our capacity. Lymphedema and related cancer prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation services are chronically under-funded and require philanthropic support to ensure we can continue to offer the critical care and services needed to improve the quality of life for patients suffering from lymphedema in our community.

Your support will:

- Increase the number of patients being seen at the MUHC's two lymphedema clinics.
- Enable the MUHC to provide more educational workshops to nurses, physiotherapists and lymphedema therapists across Quebec and North America – increasing the number of specialists able to treat the condition
- Decrease wait times for one-on-one consultations – currently the program has a five to six month waiting list
- Allow the MUHC to increase the number of clinical trials available to lymphedema patients with extremely complex and severe cases