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Response of foot ulcers complicated by osteomyelitis to primarily conservative therapy in diabetes

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Early excision of infected bone is widely recommended in the management of osteomyelitis of the foot in diabetes. However, evidence from over 500 published cases indicates that conservative management may be effective. We have therefore reviewed our experience of primarily conservative management in a consecutive series of 113 patients (median age 68.4 years; 73% male) presenting with osteomyelitis to a specialist foot clinic over a period of 5 years. The diagnosis of osteomyelitis was initially clinical and was then confirmed in each case by the demonstration of bone disruption on X-rays taken up to 12 months after presentation. MRI, isotope bone scans and bone culture were not performed routinely, but the results were taken into consideration when they were. Management was primarily conservative, non-surgical and undertaken largely as an outpatient, with antibiotics being administered exclusively orally in the majority. The antibiotic regimen was broad spectrum and empirical (initially clindamycin plus ciprofloxacin, or amoxicillin-clavulanic acid), and only adjusted if there was limited clinical response, especially if isolates were shown to be resistant, or if the patient was intolerant of the preparations used. Infected bone was excised only if the infection showed no sign of responding to conservative management. 100 of 113 (88.5%) episodes were confined to the metatarsals and phalanges. 74 (65.5%) episodes healed (infection eradicated and ulcers epithelialised) within a median (range) of 119 (11–861) days. 20 (17.7%) underwent minor amputation after a median interval of 53 (9–213) days. 8 (7.1%) underwent major amputation after 74 (9–487) days. Five episodes were unhealed at death, and the infection remained unresolved in one. The rate of healing and limb salvage exceed those recently reported by a centre advocating aggressive surgical debridement and digit amputation. The place of early surgery in this condition has yet to be determined.