Is Lymphedema Cure a Clinical Reality

Wei F. Chen, Ying C. Ku, Takumi Yamamoto, Sonia K Pandey.

Affiliations below.

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Abstract:
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Corresponding Author:
BS Ying C. Ku, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Cleveland, United States, y_ku0109@email.campbell.edu, bencil1234@gmail.com

Affiliations:
Wei F. Chen, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Cleveland, United States
Ying C. Ku, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Cleveland, United States
Takumi Yamamoto, National Center for Global Health and Medicine, Plastic Surgery, Shinjuku-ku, Japan
Sonia K Pandey, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Plastic surgery, Cleveland, United States
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Wei F. Chen, MD; Ying C. Ku, BS; Takumi Yamamoto, MD; Sonia K. Pandey, MD

1. Center for Lymphedema Research and Reconstruction, Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Cleveland Clinic Foundation; Cleveland, OH, USA

2. Department of Plastic Surgery, National Center for Global Health and Medicine in Japan; Tokyo, Japan

Corresponding author: Wei F. Chen, MD, FACS, Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, 9500 Euclid Avenue/ A60, Cleveland, OH 44195 (e-mail: chenw6@ccf.org).

Lymphedema surgery and the science of lymphology rapidly advanced in the past decades. Today, procedures such as supermicrosurgical lymphaticovenular anastomosis (LVA), vascularized lymph vessel transfer (VLVT), and vascularized lymph node transfer (VLNT) are performed worldwide and are no longer considered esoteric. Despite increased popularity of these procedures, the debate on these procedures’ efficacies continues. More specifically, is lymphedema surgically curable. Here we offer our experience and viewpoint.

In our experience, with cure defined as a patient being free of all lymphedema-related symptoms without the need for further treatments including the use of compression garment, lymphedema cure is most definitely a clinical reality (Video, Supplemental Digital Content 1). Although achievable only in a small fraction of our patients, we have seen all three procedures (LVA, VLVT, and VLNT) capable of effecting cure since 2011.1–4 The feasibility of cure seems to correlate with the fluid-predominant state of lymphedema, or stages of the pathology in which edema was fully reversible. No cure was ever observed in patients with solid-predominant disease, or when the affected limbs were prominently affected by lymphedema-induced lipodystrophy. These physiologic procedures seemed not capable of reversing the pathologic lipodystrophy once developed. Interestingly, complete disease reversal was possible even in patients with advanced lymphatic injury, or those showing “diffuse” pattern on indocyanine green lymphography, provided that their conditions remained fluid-predominant.

Regardless of the physiologic procedure performed, all of those who achieved cure followed a consistent time course of prompt, notable symptomatic improvement within two weeks from surgery. All then experienced progressive amelioration of pain, paresthesia, heaviness, clumsiness, rigidity, severity and frequency of spontaneous infection, exercise intolerance, and other related symptoms in the following six postoperative months. All cases of cure were documented between six to eighteen months following surgery. None achieved cure if still dependent on
compression garment on the eighteenth month. Frequently, those who achieved cure had such insight – they knew they were ready to stop wearing compression garments and would stop doing so themselves before being given permission by us at subsequent clinic follow-up. Although remarkable improvements were consistently seen in those who underwent hybrid reconstruction (debulking procedure in combination with a physiologic procedure), fewer cure cases were observed in this patient group relative to those with fluid-predominant disease who underwent physiologic procedure-only.

In our opinion, we should not be complacent with only ameliorating lymphedema. We need to aim to cure. We should review our collective experience, investigate patient/technical characteristics that are associated with cure. With these known, we hope to be able to achieve cure with increased confidence and frequency. For now, with this commentary, we hope to convey to the lymphedema surgery community that cure is a clinical reality, and it is time that we set our therapeutic bar higher.

Author contribution

Each person listed as an author has participated in the study to a significant extent. Wei Chen was involved in conceptualization, resources, supervision, writing and reviewing the manuscript draft. Ying Ku was involved in resources, reviewing, and editing the manuscript draft. Takumi Yamamoto was involved in conceptualization and writing of the original draft. Sonia Pandey was involved in supervision and reviewing of the manuscript draft.

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References


**Supplemental Digital Content Legends**

**Video, Supplementary Digital Content 1.** Video recording of a patient who achieved lymphedema cure at a year following successful LVA. The patient previously suffered from acquired left arm lymphedema with a constant need for compression garment. Despite consistent use of compression, she continued to experience significant paresthesia, discomfort, and swelling. She now reported complete resolution of lymphedema symptoms and not needing any further treatments including the use of compression garment.