The ointment is mightier than the scalpel
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DESCRIPTION
Surgical debridement and amputation were considered by the admitting team, for malodourous crusting legs with maggots in a 62-year-old man (figure 1A). We tried a simpler remedy: 500 g of a greasy emollient (30% yellow soft paraffin, 30% emulsifying wax, 40% liquid paraffin) was applied for 15 minutes followed by debridement with tweezers and compression, giving a much improved appearance (figure 1B). The maggots were physically removed during the cleaning process. The patient admitted to poor compliance to a gluten-free diet for his coeliac disease, explaining an albumin level of 19 g/L leading to lymphoedema with secondary cutaneous changes.

Contributors AK was involved in the care of the patient, sourced the photographs, obtained written consent and wrote up the article. NL was involved in the care of the patient, and reviewed, edited and approved the article prior to submission.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent Obtained.
Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Learning points
▸ An assessment of the skin should be made only when the skin has been cleaned. This is particularly the case in patients with poor physical hygiene, as superficial debris can change the appearance of the skin.
▸ Cleaning can be performed with the aid of emollients and tweezers to unmask the true state of the underlying skin.
▸ Always consider the possibility of systemic disease when confronted by cutaneous changes and lymphoedema.

Figure 1  (A) Admission. (B) Post-treatment.