

## THE GREAT IMPOSTOR: RUNNING INCOGNITO

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**Introduction:** Syphilis has been dubbed 'The great imposter' for its myriad of presentations. It is a venereal disease caused by the spirochete, *Treponema Pallidum* sp. Unlike gonorrhoea, septic arthritis resulting from syphilis is a rare entity.

**Discussion:** A 52 year old man, active heroin chaser with Hepatitis B and C, presented with painful right knee swelling for 6 months. Despite having three arthroscopy washout done and completion of systemic antibiotic therapy with 2nd generation cephalosporin, his swelling worsened. He was then referred to our centre for further management. X ray and MRI imaging of the knee showed features of erosive arthropathy. Repeated synovial biopsy was inconclusive, showing nonspecific synovitis. The culture and sensitivity never yield any organism. Finally, MDT with infectious disease unit suggested a full work up of venereal disease. Rapid plasma reagin and *Treponema pallidum* hemagglutination confirmed the diagnosis of syphilis. IV Penicillin 2.4MU QID was given for 6 weeks. Good clinical and laboratory response was seen but the sequelae of severe post septic knee erosive arthropathy was reconstructed with a hinged TKR and medial tibia augmentation. He had excellent function post operatively with knee ROM ranging 0- 120 degree and full weight bearing ambulation despite having a 3cm limb length discrepancy which was corrected with a simple shoe raise.

**Conclusion:** Diagnosing syphilitic arthritis can be elusive as it cannot be cultured with the routine culture medium and biopsy of the synovium provides inconclusive result as in this case. The VDRL test has shown high specificity and sensitivity in diagnosing syphilis. Once diagnosed, it is crucial to differentiate syphilitic arthritis from tabes dorsalis causing neuropathic joint as reconstructive arthroplasty surgery is contraindicated in the latter. When faced with an impasse, having a multidisciplinary team discussion would provide a different approach and perspective to the case for the benefit of the patient.