DEFINITION OF A SKIN TEAR
A skin tear is a traumatic wound resulting from separation of the epidermis and dermis due to friction and/or shearing forces, together with intrinsic skin changes associated with ageing (Fleck, 2007; Birch and Coggins, 2003; Meuleneire, 2002). Tears can be simple tears such as linear laceration (Fig 1) or include tissue loss (Fig 2), with haematoma, bruising or necrosis (Beldon, 2008a; Nazarko, 2005).

Skin tears can occur on any limb, however, Fleck (2007) indicates that they occur most commonly in the upper extremities, with 80% occurring on hands and arms. Nazarko (2005) suggests skin tears most frequently occur on the dorsal sides of the hands, the lower arms and the tibia. Ratliff and Fletcher (2007) suggest that the arms are the most common sites in non-ambulatory adults, whereas the legs are most affected in those who are mobile.

EFFECTS OF AGEING ON SKIN
As people age, the amount and strength of skin collagen and elastin reduces, resulting in visible skin changes such as sagging, wrinkling and dryness (Nazarko, 2007). This process can adversely affect the normal functions of the skin, making it less able to withstand normal wear and tear (Penzer and Finch, 2001). These effects put older people at increased risk of skin tearing as a result of trauma (Nazarko, 2007; Penzer and Finch, 2001). There is also a loss of subcutaneous tissue in older people resulting in loss of mechanical protection and insulation (Reddy, 2008).

Many older people have a variety of co-morbidities which affect their balance, cognitive abilities and awareness, suggesting that they are more likely to sustain injuries and present with skin tears than other groups (Beldon, 2008a). The ageing process is associated with sensory changes including visual impairment, which also put older people at increased risk of bumping into objects and sustaining injuries (Reddy, 2008).

Pressure may be a causative factor for skin tears but is not recognised as the primary cause (Baranoski, 2003). Removing tape from fragile older skin may also result in skin tears (Fleck, 2007).