Sandra French spent $113k to remove litres of fat caused by lipoedema

Grandmother Sandra French, 67, has had her life changed after paying $100,000 for surgery to help her with a cruel disease. The procedure isn't available publicly because it's deemed cosmetic.

Robyn Riley Follow

@rileyrobyn08 6 min read May 23, 2025 - 5:00AM

Herald Sun

Grandmother Sandra French, 67, went in search of a solution for lipoedema because the cruel condition had impacted her life to the point she couldn't drive a car, travel with her husband Clinton or walk out the front door unaided.

The final straw was that it stopped her lifting her granddaughter Maya, 3.

Mrs French said the solution for her was surgery – that cost the family $113,000 – to remove litres of lipoedema fat cells from her swollen arms and legs.

"It has been life-changing," she said. "It has given me my life back."

Below she shares her story

I was looking back at old photographs of my Nanna when she was younger when it really hit me.

Nanna had the same unusually big legs and arms that I did, as do a couple of other female relatives.

I had grown up and become middle-aged thinking something wasn't right. As a young teenager in Colac I knew my legs were different, and it got worse at puberty which was very hard to deal with.

I exercised a lot, but unlike the other girls my legs and arms stayed big. So I dieted – it would actually be more accurate to say I starved myself. I was desperate.

Nothing worked.

Sandra French when she was younger. Picture: Supplied.

When I had my two children my legs and arms just got bigger. They felt heavy and they ached all the time which meant it was really hard to exercise anymore so I put on weight all over.

Doctors just thought I was overweight and said I needed to do more exercise more and eat less which made me even more depressed.

They were wrong.

I had a disease and it's called lipoedema. Many people reading this probably have the same disease, but may not know it and are suffering in silence. That's why I am writing it because it is important that you know you are not alone and that you're not "fat and lazy"– and there is something you can do about it.

Lipoedema is a medical condition characterised by abnormal, painful, inflammatory fat accumulation typically affecting hips, thighs, and lower limbs, and sometimes arms.

It is a cruel disease

It is a cruel disease. You probably have seen women with lipoedema down at the shops or at work and wondered why they don't just eat less and exercise more. I get it, but if only it was that easy.

Exercise does not reduce the characteristic lipoedema fat, as the condition involves diseased fat resistant to typical metabolic processes.

Weight loss drugs don't fix lipoedema either.

Lipoedema is hormonally triggered which means it get worse around puberty, pregnancy and menopause. It is genetic, so is often passed down from a grandmother, or aunt, to sisters and granddaughters.

When I saw the picture of my grandmother I finally understood the family curse.

My lipoedema got so bad that I couldn't even drive because I couldn't fit between the seat and steering wheel.

Sandra French with her husband Clinton and granddaughter Maya

When we went on holiday to north Queensland I needed a wheelchair to get me through the airport and a lift to get my on to the plane.

Worse of all, when my granddaughter was born I couldn't walk with her in my arms because I was so unstable on my big legs I was worried about falling over and hurting her.

Depression and eating disorders are not surprisingly common with women who suffer lipoedema.

Sandra and Clinton French on their wedding day. She said her husband had always been very supportive.

Fortunately, my husband Clinton has been very supportive, without his support, assistance and love especially during the surgery phase with all the trips to the Gold Coast.

In 2019, I changed doctors and she looked at me and said I had lipoedema. I was so relieved to finally know what it was.

Through lots of research I was able to contact a doctor on the Gold Coast, Dr Chris Lekich

because he has been fighting for years to raise awareness about lipoedema.

In 2022 I had my first surgery with Dr Chris. Since then I have had five more surgeries with 37 litres of diseased fat fluid removed. It's not easy and it is not cosmetic surgery. This is a disease.

The surgery gave me back my independence and my life.

I am now 67 years old. I wish I had known much earlier about lipoedema, but I feel like a completely different person now. A weight has literally been lifted off me.

I don't have supermodel legs, but I can walk through airports without needing a wheelchair or a lift to get me on a plane. I can drive again.

But the thing I treasure the most about my new life is that I can now play with my granddaughter.

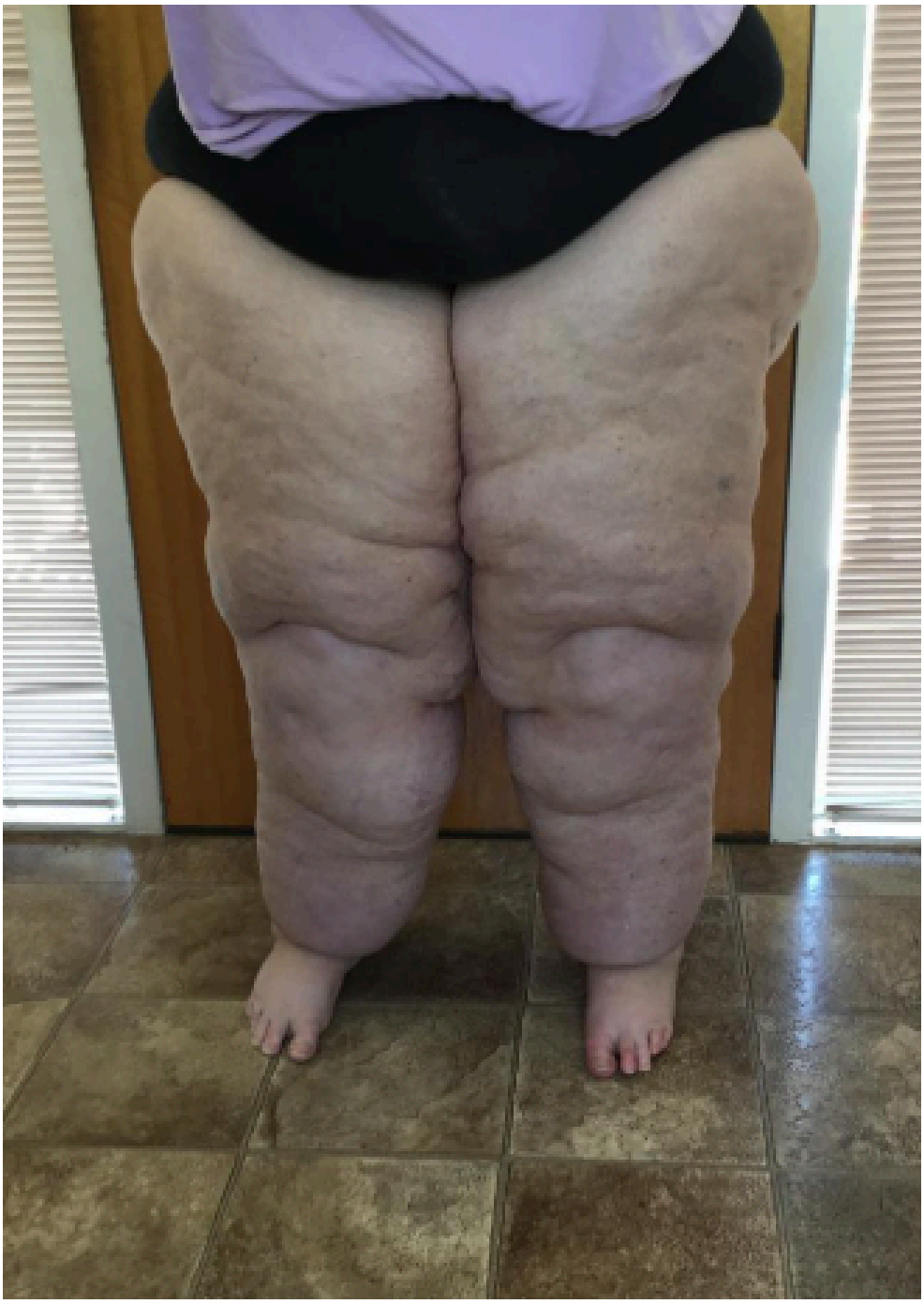
Condition 'constantly misdiagnosed as obesity'

For the past eight years Dr Lekich said he had been treating lipoedema patients at a dedicated hospital in Queensland and was frustrated that the condition remained frequently under-diagnosed or misdiagnosed as obesity or lymphoedema.

But he said as such the surgery was not publicly funded because it was labelled cosmetic.

Dr Lekich says it is a silent epidemic affecting mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends; women whose voices deserve to be heard.

"It has been a real battle to convince stakeholders including Medicare, health funds and medical organisations that lipoedema is a disease, not cosmetic and deserves to be recognised by Medicare," he said.



Sandra French says surgery for lipoedema has been "life changing". Picture: Supplied.,

"It's a disease and as such it has its own carnage. People need to understand it's not a lifestyle issue; people with lipoedema don't have a choice."

Dr Lekich also has first-hand experience with close family members suffering from the painful and debilitating condition that affects around one in 10 women globally.

"I have seen the anguish it causes young teenagers and the fear that it causes. I got into this field because my then-wife had a massive blood clot with varicose veins."

He then trained as a phlebologists, a doctor who diagnoses and treats conditions associated with varicose veins, lymphoatics and lipoedema.

He is now a medical expert treating the disease surgically with a special liposuction technique to remove lipoedema fat cells and stop progression of the disease.

Dr Chris Lekich is hoping to raise awareness of lipoedema through the Ride to Walk With Freedom event in the US next month. Image: Supplied.

His mission to raise awareness

Dr Lekich, 58, wants more done for patients with lipoedema.

Although men can develop lipoedema, it is rare. Dr Lekich said it almost exclusively affects women and is triggered by hormones usually from puberty, but also spiking during pregnancy and perimenopause.

He is taking part in a 12-day race in the US next month called Ride to Walk With Freedom (RWWF) that he said combined his passion for his work with cycling.

"With this ride I am on a mission to bring global awareness to a debilitating, yet misunderstood disease called lipoedema, which potentially affects around 390 million women worldwide," Dr Lekich said.

On 10 June he fronts the start line of the ultra-endurance bicycle race, The Race Across America as part of the RWWF.

"I may not survive the ride," he said as he prepared to fly to the US this week.

"It is one of the toughest rides in the world and I won't know if I have done enough training."

"In scorching heat close to 50C you spend 21 hours a day riding through four deserts with mountains at the beginning and mountains at the end and if that's not enough when you've got 5000 kilometres in your legs, you've got the Appalachian Mountains at the end. So just a little ride."

You can follow Dr Lekich @ridetowalkwithfreedom

What is lipoedema?

• A long-term condition triggered by hormones that causes abnormal inflamed disproportionately painful fat build up in the legs and often in the arms, size 10 on top size 16 on the bottom

• It affects around one in 10 people, usually women, rare for men to develop it

• Lipoedema is often misdiagnosed as obesity or lymphoedema

• It usually involves the legs, bottom, thighs hips and calves and does not look identical for all women. It often affects the arms of women. It doesn't affect hands or feet.

• Once diagnosed it can be managed by conservative measures to reduce pain and slow progression. It can be treated with surgery, but patients should discuss this with an expert as surgery is specialised and not standard liposuction.

• Liposuction surgery removes the lipoedema fat cells in the affected areas. This dramatically decreases symptoms and improves quality of life