

I UNDERWENT LIPOSUCTION TO REDUCE THE VOLUME IN MY LEG

Sharon Saayman

I first developed primary lymphoedema ten years ago. I woke up one morning to feel my right leg tight and slightly swollen. I could not recall being bitten or anything untoward and decided it would go away of its own accord. How wrong was I to be proved.

At that time my husband and I were due to travel to South Africa to visit his family and celebrate the Millennium in style. Ten hours flying certainly did not help my swollen leg which became bigger and felt tight and uncomfortable. After a couple of weeks in South Africa, my husband took me to a local doctor. Medical care is mainly private in South Africa and I was referred to a specialist at a hospital in a nearby town. This doctor almost immediately diagnosed lymphoedema. At this point I asked how long this would be for. To my horror he informed me that it was incurable and I would need to wear compression hosiery for the rest of my life. I had arrived in my shorts, unbeknown to me that this was probably the last time I would ever wear shorts again. While this hospital did not have a lymphoedema clinic on site, they were able to measure for compression garments. I was horrified at the prospect of having to wear this ugly vile garment for the time it took me to get out of the hospital, let alone for the rest of my life. I thought to myself, I will sort this out when I get back to the UK.

Sharon Saayman is married with three children and suffers from primary lymphoedema in her right leg

On arriving back in the UK a family member told me of the lymphoedema clinic based near my home town. I later realised how fortunate I was to have this facility on my doorstep. My own doctor referred me to St Giles' lymphoedema clinic and my first appointment confirmed everything that the South African doctor had told

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me. I was devastated, psychologically, emotionally, physically my whole life had changed within weeks, these were some of my darkest days. I cried a lot, I was frustrated, angry and felt extremely sorry for myself. For many years not a day went by without this leg of mine being the pain of my life, both figuratively and literally.

It changed me in many ways. I had always been a confident person, but I felt this ebb away although I was good at the art of disguise. My dress code had to change and shoes became a problem. I had always had a weakness for shoes! My husband was my greatest support — without him I do not know how I would have got through those first few months, as he told me that I could not let this ruin my life. Slowly but surely and with the help of all the staff at St Giles I began to accept my condition, although not willingly. I know that there are a great

many more people with far worse things to contend with. Even sitting in the waiting room at St Giles I began to realise that there were people far worse off than me.

Over the years we tried many different ways to improve my leg. Again, I now know how lucky I was to have St Giles on my doorstep and having their constant support. We tried bandaging, the first attempt achieved quite a good result, decreasing the volume from approximately 27% to 13%. However, the second attempt a year or so later made no difference whatsoever. At this point I told myself that I would not go through this again. I found the bandaging over a two-week period emotionally and physically draining. My leg seemed to stabilise at about 20% difference and I wore my stocking religiously.

It was a TV programme called 'My Fat Leg' which my son told me to watch that gave me some hope for the first time in ten years. A surgeon in Sweden had developed a technique of liposuction on swollen limbs with brilliant results. While this was by no means a cure, the hope of a thinner leg drove me to pursue this treatment.

Thus, the battle began. I found a surgeon, Alec Munnoch at Ninewells Hospital, who had worked alongside the surgeon in Sweden and was performing this technique at his hospital. I approached my GP and asked to be referred to Mr Munnoch. This involved pleading my case to my local primary care board for funding. They agreed after a great deal of pleading on my part. Unfortunately though, I live in England and Mr Munnoch was under the Scottish

Health Board and they initially refused to treat me because I did not live in Scotland. I knew this would be my one and only chance of having this treatment and so persisted and persisted until Ninewells Hospital finally agreed. My first appointment with Mr Munnoch (which occurred 12 months after my initial appointment with the GP) was nerve wracking. However, he agreed to do the surgery and I was over the moon.

In February 2009 I had the four-hour operation to remove 3.2 litres of fat from my leg. I had to stay in hospital for five days. This was a difficult time as my husband could only

stay for a couple of days, as he had to return to England to look after our little boy and return to work. The staff looked after me wonderfully, but my leg was painful. It took many weeks to settle down, during which time I wondered if I had done the right thing, but the result was wonderful. The top of my thigh is actually slightly thinner than my 'good leg'. I always knew it was never a cure and a year on my leg is still unstable; the lower calf swells if I do not wear two stockings over it. But, I have the mobility back in my leg that I have not had for ten years. I realised this one day when I had to climb over a fence when walking my dog, I remember thinking, 'wow that

was easy'. I also wore my first pair of leggings and long boots for ten years.

I know that I was lucky to have this operation, although it would not be for everyone. Mr Munnoch is the only surgeon in the UK who performs this surgical technique and funding is not readily available. I can only thank him and his staff for (almost, not quite) giving me my old leg back. JL

Alex Munnoch received the Innovations in Compression award, sponsored by Urgo, for his work on 'The use of liposuction in the management of chronic oedema' at the Wounds UK 2009 awards ceremony.

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