

The tortured foot

They look good, but are they worth it? High heels deform women's feet, and the corrective surgery that results costs millions.

Story Lyndall Crisp

High heels are sexy. They make good legs look fabulous, great legs look stunning. They give the vertically challenged more confidence and authority, not to mention height.

As she sashays past her sister clomping along in sensible flatties, the woman in stiletto heels looks as if she has the world at her feet. She may well do, but she's also probably tottering towards a very unpleasant operation that is costing the community millions of dollars a year.

And it's not just fashion-conscious ladies-who-lunch who are suffering.

Orthopaedic surgeon Martin Sullivan says most of the women he operates on for shoe-related problems - bunions, neuromas (scarred tissue) and claw toes - work. Each week, about 30 per cent of his patients require corrective surgery for such problems, rising to 100

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per cent in December when it's easier to take time off.

"This is major surgery," he says. "It's now done under local anaesthetic so it's less painful, but you have to walk on your heel for five weeks and there's swelling for three to four months. It precludes you from wearing a closed shoe."

Instead, the patient wears a special flat sandal. "I've had barristers who won't go to court wearing the shoe," Sullivan says.

"They feel, I don't know why, that the other side would have the advantage."

"I spend most of my time talking to patients not about the surgery but things like sick leave. When you have foot surgery, especially on both feet simultaneously, you become very dependent."

In the past, female flight attendants were a particularly susceptible group. Last month, a woman sued after falling into a hole in a Sydney school playground in 2000. An Ansett flight attendant at the time, she said she was unable to continue working because she could no longer wear the five-centimetre-high heels required under flight grooming rules. (Now, Qantas requires court shoes with a heel for skirts, flat shoes for pants; Virgin Blue regulations say all female cabin crew should wear court shoes with a heel, but flat shoes are allowed. Neither airline stipulates height.)

Corporate women are another endangered species. The professional image dictates high heels; glossy fashion magazines endorse it.

It's not in their interests, says Sullivan, who has appealed to editors - some of whom are intimate with the operation - to tackle the problem. "[But] a lot of their advertisers, like Ferragamo, are manufacturers of these shoes. There's money involved."

Men rarely suffer the same foot problems; one in 25 of Sullivan's patients is male and their problems are always genetic. Most women patients are aged between 45 and 55, the onset of menopause causing a broadening of the foot.

Not all women's foot problems are the result of bad footwear; genetic factors are also important. It's not uncommon for teenage girls to undergo surgery.

The healthiest feet in Australia are in far north Queensland and central Australia, where women go barefoot or wear flat sandals. The worst are in the wealthy suburbs of Melbourne - where the climate calls for closed shoes - and Sydney's eastern suburbs. "That's why I decided to practise here," says Sullivan, who works at St Vincent's Clinic in Darlinghurst.

Foot surgery as a result of genetic deformities and shoes that are too high and too narrow is one of the fastest-growing areas of orthopaedic surgery in Australia.



Is this a modern form of foot binding?

Photo Michele Mossop

Sullivan is one of only about 20 orthopaedic surgeons in Australia who specialise in pure adult foot and ankle surgery.

He became interested in the high cost of had footwear a decade ago when he was studying in the US under Michael Coughlin, an expert on foot deformities and past president of the American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society. A study done at the time showed the problem was costing the United States \$US1.5 billion in medical expenses and 15 million work days annually.

When Sullivan returned to Australia in 1994, he and another doctor, Joyce Burcham, surveyed 161 women working in the North Sydney CBD and found 70 per cent suffered foot pain, 61 per cent had trouble finding shoes that fitted and 64 per cent had trouble finding shoes that were comfortable and fashionable. The pain and deformity did not appear to relate to the number of pairs each woman bought or how much she paid for them.

Based on this initial survey, Sullivan and Burcham applied to the NSW Department for Women for a \$50,000 grant to explore ways of reducing the prevalence of foot pain and the overall cost to the community. They were knocked back.

According to the Federal Department of Health, 2,142 public patients had surgery for foot deformity in 1999-2000. The cost to the taxpayer was \$2,107 to \$2,459 per operation. Add to that the costs of private patients - the majority - and the total cost is close to \$8 million a year. High heels also contribute to postural deformities - back problems occur in women 2.5 times more often than in men.

The answer, says Sullivan, is education. He concedes it's useless telling women not to wear high heels, but advises them never to buy shoes that are narrower than their foot or need to be broken in, and to limit the time spent on high heels.

He would like to see a similar campaign to the one in the US, where the American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society, the National Shoe Retailers Association and the Podiatrist Association got together to inform shops and customers about correct shoe fit through a national advertising program.

In response to increasing

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demand, podiatry - the first stop for most patients - has moved from being a tech course to a university course in Australia. Still, Sullivan has many patients who arrive clutching expensive orthotics that won't fit fashionable shoes.

Women's footwear has always been a cultural and fashion statement.

For 1,000 years it was a trend among high-class Chinese to bind their young daughters' feet to make them a dainty "three-inch golden lotus". Such women were revered in society until the practice was banned by the new Chinese republic in 1911. Overnight, they were ostracised.

But a different form of socially acceptable torture was just around the corner.

After World War II, constricting shoes became fashionable in many countries; by the early 1970s, foot problems requiring surgery were becoming more common.

Will women always be slaves to fashion? For the answer to that question, peek under the table at any dinner party. Chances are most women will have kicked off their shoes.