

Chris LeSar wins Champions of Health Care Community Physician Award

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Champions of Health Care award winner Dr. Christopher LeSar poses for a portrait at the Vascular Institute of Chattanooga on Tuesday, July 30, 2019, in Chattanooga, Tenn.

As the son and grandson of medical doctors, Chris LeSar says he initially tried as hard as he could to run away from being a physician and thought he was more interested in physics growing up and going to Xavier University in Ohio. But after working in a dark lab on lasers and optics, LeSar soon discovered he needed to be around other people and decided to combine his interest in science and people by following the family tradition into medicine. But unlike his father who was an internal medicine doctor, LeSar was eager to use his hands and his mind in not only diagnosing but fixing problems as a surgeon. "I like puzzles and problem solving," LeSar says.

He also likes a challenge and vascular surgery offered that calling, especially after he came to Chattanooga at age 34 as the city's first vascular surgeon doing open and endovascular procedures at University Surgical Associates. While teaching at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga and lecturing in Europe about his work, LeSar recalls encountering endovascular work being done on those with problems below the knee that wasn't being done in the United States but which offered a promising alternative to amputations.

"I went on a mission to become what I call a critical limb specialist," LeSar says. That puts the Chattanooga vascular surgeon among only about 100 such surgeons in America. "I went to Europe to learn how to do this kind of surgery and bring it back to Chattanooga to really take on the problem of amputation."

While developing his own medical and surgical specialties, LeSar also noticed the problems in medical care for some people, including those with critical limb blood insufficiency. Those who developed problems with black toes or gangrene of a limb often were not treated until their problems became so acute that they ultimately require amputation.

LeSar said his procedures, most of which can be done on an outpatient basis, often help save limbs and avoid major surgery and hospitalization for his patients. But LeSar said he was frustrated in the past that it often took months for those needing help to get appointments to be seen for their ailments so he resolved to address what he saw as a shortcoming in the health care system. "I told my wife that I wanted to quit the best job I had ever had; I had to sell our house, and I wouldn't be able to pay her for many months., but I was going to open up a new business and do it the way I thought it should be done," LeSar recalls. "After seeing thousands of patients, and seeing the many changes in delivery of healthcare, I realized that making the leap into private practice was ultimately better for my patients' overall care and treatment experience."

Winner: Dr. Christopher LeSar

Accomplishments: One of Chattanooga's first endovascular surgeons and the region's first critical limb specialist, LeSar started the Vascular Institute of Chattanooga in 2015 and has grown the practice to 67 employees and two locations to offer alternative to amputation for those with critical limb disease. He is also the volunteer medical director for Dare to Care and is praised by his employees and patients for his compassion and care.

So nearly four years ago LeSar left USA with his nurse, Connie Jones, and the two of them started the Vascular Institute of Chattanooga. VIC has since grown to 67 employees, including five surgeons under contract.

"Dr. LeSar treats his patients as if they were his own family," Jones says. "He provides care that is so compassionate and so skillful that you feel like he is giving his heart and soul to the care of that patient."

Using nurse practitioners and other staff, LeSar pledged to answer all phone inquiries with a real person and to try to see any new patient for an initial review within a couple of weeks, when needed.

One of his main focuses is treating critical limb ischemia, which is responsible for most amputations. He uses small catheterization and endovascular procedures to get into small arteries and fix blockages and other problems. About 80% of the procedures are done in his offices in Chattanooga or Cleveland.

LeSar sees his work as critical in the South, where 42% of all amputations occur in the country.

"We're striving to be a beacon of hope for amputation prevention," LeSar says.

In recommending LeSar as a Champion of Healthcare, patients and employees praised his compassion and care, noting he often prays with his patients and blesses each of those he treats.

"He makes a huge difference in his patient's lives, both from a medical treatment standpoint, and from a spiritual standpoint," said Lind Tallent, one of the VIC employees who nominated LeSar for the award. "He always strives to make them feel like they are important, and that they matter."

Chattanooga Realtor Mark Hite said LeSar has helped his friends with his specialized treatments and has also helped the entire Chattanooga

community with "is tremendous philanthropic efforts" in support of a number of area charities, including serving as volunteer medical director for Dare to Care.

"Giving back to your community and helping those who you do not know, without hope of compensation, is a key moral value that we need to model for future leaders," Hite said in his nomination letter for LeSar's award.

