

Spraying, wiping and sanitising have been a way of life for Sandra Pankhurst for the last three decades, but she never expected it to become an obsession for the rest of the nation.

The 68-year-old from Frankston, Victoria owns the trauma cleaning business, Specialised Trauma Cleaning Services, set up to deal with crime scenes and other extreme cleaning jobs. During the last eight months while other companies have floundered due to the effects of the global pandemic, her business has thrived.

Sandra and her staff have transformed their focus and found themselves on the frontline, cleaning up Covid-19.

"This week, my staff were called to Covid-clean a nursing home with 92 rooms, each room taking anywhere between 45 minutes to one hour for a crew of two or more," Sandra tells New Idea exclusively. "You can imagine the all resources involved."

The cleaning process involves fogging machines, industrial steamers and wiping down twice before washing with detergents and applying disinfectants.

Crews dress head to toe in hazmat suits and scour every nook and cranny for the virus, steaming carpets, wiping down blinds, scrubbing back drain scum and then leaving a protective seal of disinfectant behind.

It's a meticulous job and one that the Covid cleaners can't afford to get wrong. In previous jobs they couldn't leave a drop of blood from a crime scene behind, now they have to wipe down every last viral particle.

"It's a lot of responsibility and pressure," Sandra says. "A single mistake could cost lives."

In early 2020 Sandra was watching as the pandemic plagued our shores, but



SANDRA PANKHURST IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Sandra and her team operate with extreme caution, especially when entering Covid-19 zones.



I'M CLEANING UP COVID

nothing could have prepared her for how it played out.

"Everyone was nervous, the fear factor was high and my staff were worried about their own safety," she says. "But, like true heroes they soldiered on, and with business for Covid cleaning really starting to pick up around April, they had to put worries about their own health behind the health of the nation they were protecting."

The biggest risk Sandra's staff faced was cross-

contamination and they learnt to fog each other down after every room they cleaned so their hazmat suits were sanitised.

Their extreme caution ensured nobody on her team got sick despite their constant work in Covid-contamination zones.

Cleaning up after the pandemic was a natural move for Sandra, who has long been scrubbing where nobody else dares to.

Her former list of clients include neglected and hoarder's homes, drug dens as well as death scenes after a murder or suicide.

"I was so used to walking into sickening places with putrid smells, such as overflowing toilets with faeces strewn across the carpet, blood smeared on walls or webs of spiders, rotten food and junk," she says.

In comparison Covid cleaning seems less distasteful,

especially given Sandra's business now focuses around childcare centres, nursing homes and police stations. Ironically though, this new work is far more deadly and because of Sandra's lung condition, developed from years of working with toxic chemicals, she can't go into battle with the virus herself. Instead, semi-

retired, she is the face of the business and has written a book, *The Trauma Cleaner: One Woman's Extraordinary Life in Death, Decay & Disaster*, about her experiences.

"I miss the action," she says, but she's not referring to the blood and gore. "The satisfaction I got from leaving houses in a presentable manner for the family left behind. I liked to help, one family at a time."

At 68, she is also an active advocate for aged care rights, disability and mental health, the latter of which she is particularly concerned about in the aftermath of Covid-19.

"Earlier, we used to see a few who had only junk for company. But now, we are all prisoners in our own homes," she says.



Death, decay and disaster is all in a day's work for this cleaning queen.

