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## **EAST TIMORESE TEEN'S HEARTFELT THANKS TO AUSTRALIA**

An East Timorese teenager who had only months to live due to a heart condition has thanked Australians who donated money for her airfare to Australia for lifesaving surgery.

Ursula de Carvalho Soares, 17, flew to Australia this week for a procedure to repair one of her heart valves at Southern Health's Monash Heart.

"My heartfelt thanks goes to the people of Australia and the doctors, nurses and hospital staff in Australia and East Timor who have helped me," Ursula said.

"Now that I'm well again I look forward to returning home and re-starting my studies.

"When I was 11 my heart condition meant I became too tired to walk to school, and so I had to leave. Now I would like to finish school and study medicine, so I could help other people, although I know that my family does not have the ability to support me financially."

Warrnambool cardiologist Dr Noel Bayley, who does voluntary work in East Timor, identified Ursula's condition. Her prospects initially looked grim, as there are no specialist medical facilities in East Timor, and her family lacked the means to send her to Australia for the operation.

Two months ago Dr Bayley publicised the plight of Ursula and teenager Flavia Lucilda Guterres, who also suffered from mitral stenosis, a narrowing of the heart valve that can lead to heart failure. Australians responded with a flood of donations – \$13,000 in the first week and almost \$30,000 to date.

"The response was just extraordinary. People from all over Australia, and even Australian Defence Force personnel serving in East Timor, contacted me to offer help," Dr Bayley said.

"We had everything from elderly patients of mine offering \$50 from their pension cheques to larger contributions on behalf of individuals and corporates.

"These young people have the potential to be East Timor's best and brightest. Thanks to the amazing generosity of Australian donors, they now have a second chance at life."

Dr Bayley said East Timor had many "teenagers with the hearts of 80 year olds" due to the effect of childhood rheumatic fever, which has virtually been eradicated in the west. He was now hopeful of bringing at least three patients a year to Australia for the procedure, which can cost up to \$20,000 per patient.

Cardiologist Professor Richard Harper and his team at Southern Health's Monash Heart volunteered their expertise to operate on Ursula and Flavia and have pledged to operate on two young East Timorese patients each year.

Logistics company PDL Toll has agreed to transport patients between Darwin and Dili, while Virgin Blue donated the Darwin-Melbourne flight for Ursula and her mother.

Tax deductible donations can be made to the St John of God East Timor Fund, PO Box 316, Warrnambool, 3280.

**Media contact:** Ingrid Svendsen, CPR Communications, 0409 007 530 / Suzana Talevski, Southern Health, (03) 9594 7722



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[www.southernhealth.org.au](http://www.southernhealth.org.au)

**Monash Medical Centre, Clayton**  
246 Clayton Road  
Clayton  
Tel: 9494 6666

**Monash Medical Centre, Moorabbin**  
Centre Road  
East Bentleigh  
Tel: 9928 8111

**Kingston Centre**  
Warrigal Road  
Cheltenham  
Tel: 9265 1000

**Dandenong Hospital**  
David Street  
Dandenong  
Tel: 9554 1000

**Casey Hospital**  
Kangan Drive  
Berwick  
Tel: 8768 1200

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