

Lucky trifecta for East Timorese heart patients

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Three East Timorese women, including one that faced the prospect of dying in pregnancy or childbirth, will return to their families next week after lifesaving heart surgery in Australia.

Leading cardiologist Professor Richard Harper, of MonashHeart, performed heart valve procedures on all three women yesterday, after they were flown to Australia by the East Timor Hearts Fund.

Sebastiana dos Reis, 24, was rushed to Australia last week for emergency treatment amid fears for her life.

"The doctors have told me that without this surgery I had very little time, and that it is likely that I would have died in childbirth, as my heart would not have been strong enough to go through labour," Ms dos Reis said.

"I am so grateful to the Australians who have helped me so that I can now have a family and a future."

Medical adviser to the East Timor Hearts Fund, cardiologist Dr Noel Bayley, identified Cristina da Costa and Natalina Hornai as candidates for assistance during a screening clinic in East Timor last year; while doctors at the Bairo Pite clinic in Dili made an emergency request on behalf of Ms dos Reis just before Christmas.

Dr Bayley said the women's heart conditions were a legacy of childhood rheumatic fever, virtually eradicated in the west but rife in developing countries like East Timor.

"In East Timor there are many, many young people with the hearts of 80 year olds but this particularly affects young women with these conditions, whose hearts cannot withstand the strain of pregnancy and labour.

"It is a great tragedy that these young women often die in childbirth, and frequently the baby is lost as well. This is a truly horrible scenario, especially in a country that values child-bearing and family so highly.

"Yet they can be treated effectively in countries like Australia, and that it is why it is so satisfying to be able to mobilise Australian donors, hospitals and surgeons to assist."

Dr Bayley thanked Professor Harper and Monash Heart for their rapid response to the request to help Ms dos Reis, and for their assistance to all three women.

The East Timor Hearts Fund aims to raise \$100,000 a year in cash and in-kind donations to bring up to five young East Timorese to Australia for surgery. Details:

www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au / www.facebook.com/easttimorheartsfund

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