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CHRISTMAS COMES EARLY FOR EAST TIMORESE HEART PATIENT

A young East Timorese mum will soon be reunited with her son and daughter following life-saving surgery in Australia.

Immaculada da Conceicao Gusmao, who turned 22 this month, is looking forward to a "normal life", including running around with children Sequertazia Marcia, 4, and Globadino Marcel, 2, following heart valve replacement surgery at The Royal Melbourne Hospital this month.

"Now I can look forward to a long life with my family," Immaculada said. "I just want to get well, be normal again and take care of my babies."

Medical aid organisation East Timor Hearts Fund brought Immaculada to Australia for treatment with assistance from sponsor Macquarie Telecom, which provided financial support for her procedure.

Cardiothoracic surgeon Marco Larobina, from The Royal Melbourne Hospital, said the surgery would be life changing for Immaculada and her children.

"Without surgery, Immaculada had very limited life expectancy due to damage to her heart valve caused by childhood rheumatic fever, which is common in East Timor," Mr Larobina said.

"The operation went very well, and following the recovery period, I am expecting Immaculada to lead a healthy and full life with her family."

For years Immaculada had lived debilitating symptoms, including breathlessness and dizziness, as well as the prospect of not seeing her children grow up.

She expressed her gratitude to the Australian doctors and donors who had assisted her.

Warrnambool cardiologist Dr Noel Bayley, medical adviser to the East Timor Hearts Fund, identified Immaculada as a candidate for surgery in Australia at a screening clinic in August, during one of his regular trips to East Timor.

"Immaculada's condition was dire. Without medical assistance, which is unavailable in East Timor, her prospects were grim," Dr Bayley said

"In East Timor there are many, many young people with the hearts of 80 year olds but this particularly affects young women, who often die because their hearts cannot withstand the strain of pregnancy and labour.

"Immaculada's condition meant it was likely that she would not live to see her children grow up, which would have been a terrible tragedy."

Dr Bayley thanked Mr Larobina and The Royal Melbourne Hospital for giving Immaculada "a second chance at life".

Immaculada is the eighth patient brought to Australia by East Timor Hearts Fund since its establishment two years ago. All are now doing well. For information on how to donate go to www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au

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