

Aussie first heart procedure saves Timorese schoolgirl

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A gravely ill 12 year old East Timorese girl is looking forward to returning to school and playing with her friends after a life-saving heart procedure in Melbourne this week.

East Timor Hearts Fund, a community-based medical aid organisation, rushed Arminda Soares to Australia for treatment after her desperate condition was identified by its volunteer medical team at a clinic in Dili four weeks ago.

The grade five student, who travelled to Australia with her older sister, is believed to be the youngest patient in Australia to have the mitral balloon procedure.

"Because I have heart disease, I am losing weight and breathless. I cough, have no appetite and I have chest pain. It all makes me feel sad," Arminda said.

"When I am well again I will continue at school and play with my friends at home and at school."

Airfares for Arminda, and fellow patient Maria Filipa, 33, were paid for by public donations. The medical team, including leading surgeon Professor Richard Harper, from SouthernHealth's MonashHeart, donated their services.

East Timor Hearts Fund's volunteer medical adviser, Dr Noel Bayley, said that without help, the outlook for Arminda was grim.

"There are many young people in East Timor with serious heart disease caused by childhood rheumatic fever. Scarring caused by the condition means these young people have the sort of heart disease I typically see in my 80 year old patients.

"In Australia it is virtually unheard of for a 12 year old to have life-threatening heart disease."

Dr Bayley thanked Professor Harper and MonashHeart for their rapid response to the request to help Arminda and Maria.

Professor Harper, an Australian pioneer of the mitral balloon procedure, said he had never performed it on a patient so young and so small. The team were not certain that the catheter – inserted with a special balloon that is inflated to widen the heart valve – would fit in Arminda's femoral vein and made contingencies for conventional open heart surgery if needed.

"I am delighted that Arminda's procedure went well. The team and I will get a lot of satisfaction from knowing she can return to East Timor healthy rather than as a little girl burdened before her time with debilitating heart disease," Professor Harper said.

After recuperating, Arminda and Maria will fly home next week. They will receive ongoing medical checks from East Timor Hearts Fund and are expected to be able to live normal lives.

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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