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Media Release

TIMORESE STUDENT 'LION-HEARTED' AFTER LIFE-SAVING SURGERY

An East Timorese high school student is looking forward to returning to his studies following life-saving heart surgery in Australia.

Leonito Carlos 18, underwent double heart valve replacement surgery at The Royal Melbourne Hospital last week. His life-threatening condition was identified two months ago by a volunteer medical team from the community-based medical aid organisation East Timor Hearts Fund at a screening clinic in Dili.

The organisation brought Leonito to Australia for treatment with assistance from sponsor Macquarie Telecom, which provided financial support for his procedure.

Following the surgery, Leonito said he was enjoying being able to breathe normally for the first time in years.

"Because I have heart disease, it made me feel stressed and I don't feel happy in my life. Every day I feel breathless. I had chest pain when I took a breath, shortness of breath and sometimes I felt like my heart was going to explode," Leonito said.

Cardiothoracic surgeon Marco Larobina, from The Royal Melbourne Hospital, said the surgery would be life changing for Leonito, whose condition results from childhood rheumatic fever, which is common in developing countries like Timor-Leste.

"Without surgery, Leonito had very limited life expectancy due to damage to both of his heart valves. His surgery was a complete success and now he can look forward to finishing school and leading a normal life," Mr Larobina said.

Warrnambool cardiologist Dr Noel Bayley, East Timor Hearts Fund's honorary medical adviser, said Leonito's prospects were grim without immediate surgery, which is unavailable in East Timor.

"In East Timor there are many, many young people with the hearts of 80 year olds and the lack of diagnostic and specialist cardiac care facilities means most go undiagnosed and untreated.

"One day East Timor will have a strong health system, but until then, East Timor Hearts Fund is bridging the gap by mobilising donors and medical supporters in Australia to help critical cases like Leonito."

Leonito is the tenth patient assisted by the fund in the recent years. Dr Bayley, who has undertaken pro bono work in East Timor for more than a decade, will travel there again in August for screening clinics.

Dr Bayley thanked Mr Larobina and The Royal Melbourne Hospital for giving Leonito "a second chance at life". Leonito is expected to fly back to East Timor next week.

For information on how to donate go to www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au

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