

Timorese boy's new heart is 'a dream come true'

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A gravely ill 11 year old East Timorese boy is looking forward to riding his bike, playing soccer and returning to school after a life-saving heart procedure in Melbourne this week.

East Timor Hearts Fund, a community-based medical aid organisation, flew Jeca Periera to Australia for treatment after his critical mitral stenosis (narrowed heart valve) was confirmed by its volunteer medical team at a screening clinic in Dili last month.

The grade four student, who travelled to Australia with his mum Marquita, is making an excellent recovery following a technically complex mitral balloon procedure at MonashHeart.

Jeca is the youngest patient assisted by East Timor Hearts Fund, and is believed to be the youngest person in Australia to have the mitral balloon procedure.

Increasing pain, breathlessness and fatigue have meant Jeca has not been able to go to school or enjoy other normal childhood activities.

"Now I am hoping to do the things I used to do, like playing with my friends and going back to school. I would like to be a doctor one day. That is my dream!" Jeca said.

East Timor Hearts Fund board chair Ingrid Svendsen praised Australian supporters for rallying to help Jeca. Professor Richard Harper, MonashHeart Emeritus Director of Cardiology and the medical team assisted pro bono, MonashHeart and Monash Health donated their facilities and services and sponsor Toll Remote Logistics paid for airfares. Individual donors helped meet other expenses.

"There is a lot of gloom and doom in the world today but we are providing a way for Australians to make a real difference for our next door neighbours, the East Timorese, who have no other way to access this sort of medical care," Ms Svendsen said.

"This is a dream come true for Jeca. He has a healthy life ahead of him. He can go back to school and work toward his dream of becoming a doctor."

East Timor Hearts Fund's volunteer medical adviser, Dr Noel Bayley, who has performed pro bono work in East Timor for 15 years, said Jeca's life expectancy was very limited without help.

"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 11 year old to have life-threatening heart disease."

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 Jeca’s femoral vein and made contingencies for conventional open heart surgery if needed.

“We are all thrilled that we’ve been able to help Jeca. The team and I will get a lot of satisfaction from knowing he can return to East Timor healthy, and we are all very touched that Jeca says he wants to be a doctor. We consider that a lovely tribute,” Professor Harper said.

After recuperating, Jeca is likely to fly home next week. He will receive ongoing medical checks from East Timor Hearts Fund and is expected to be able to live a normal life.

Jeca’s mum Marquita said she, her husband and their other six children could not thank enough the doctors and donors who had helped save Jeca’s life. “We know that we will never be able to repay you back. The only thing that we can do is pray to God to look after you all. Thank you so much,” Mrs Periera said.

East Timor Hearts Fund aims to raise \$100,000 a year in cash and in-kind donations to bring at least five young East Timorese to Australia for surgery. Details:
www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au / www.facebook.com/easttimorheartsfund.

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