

## Heart health squad comes to Timor-Leste

17 March 2016

Hundreds of Timorese people in Maliana and Dili will have access to free specialist heart health checks this month as part of a program run by East Timor Hearts Fund, Australia's only medical aid charity dedicated to providing life-saving heart surgery in Australia for young people from Timor-Leste.

East Timor Hearts Fund's volunteer medical team will screen pre-selected people who have been referred by local doctors because of symptoms of rheumatic heart disease or other cardiac conditions, including congenital defects like "hole in the heart".

The charity's honorary medical adviser, Dr Noel Bayley, who has undertaken pro bono work in Timor-Leste for 16 years, said lack of access to sanitation and clean water meant that many young people in Timor-Leste contracted rheumatic fever, which could lead to rheumatic heart disease.

"Particularly in rural areas, people do not have access to health services offering specialist cardiac diagnostics, and so are usually unaware of the cause of symptoms such as breathlessness, swollen feet, fainting and weakness," Dr Bailey said.

"Often people are very ill by the time we see them and identify their condition.

"But with the right treatment in Australia people can make a good recovery and go on to lead active lives."

East Timor Hearts Fund's volunteer medical team – which also includes cardiologist Dr Simon Eggleton and local and Australian interpreters and administrators – arrives on 17 March and will screen patients over four days, in Dili and Maliana.

"The screening procedure is painless, and does not take very long. We use an echocardiogram machine, which uses ultrasound to generate a picture of the working of the heart on a screen," Dr Bailey said.

"This allows us to see where there is damage to the heart valves or other areas.

"We are looking for patients that have the sort of condition that can be readily treated in Australia with either open heart surgery, to replace or repair a damaged valve, or through a less invasive mitral balloon procedure to widen a narrowed valve and get it functioning properly again."

Where patients are identified as suitable, East Timor Hearts Fund offers free treatment with leading specialists in Australia, and organises transport, accommodation and other needs. A health support worker and interpreter (and parent in the case of children) accompany patients to Australia.

Since 2010 East Timor Hearts Fund has conducted a dozen screening clinics in Timor-Leste and provided life-saving heart surgery or procedures for more than 30 patients, the youngest of whom was 11.

Angela, 23, had been too weak to continue her university studies before her mitral balloon procedure MonashHeart in Melbourne in March 2015. Late last year she graduated with a tourism degree.

"When I was receiving my award I just thought that I am one of the luckiest people in the world! I now have excellent health, and I've achieved my dreams. I can contribute my knowledge to my beloved country, Timor-Leste," Angela said.

The CEO of East Timor Hearts Fund, Ken Dusting, said the organisation was now expanding beyond individual patient work and partnering on projects to tackle the root causes of poor heart health in Timor-Leste.

"For example, we are speaking with the Government of Timor-Leste about a plan to conduct the first ever prevalence study of rheumatic heart disease in Timor-Leste this year," Mr Dusting said.

"This will be done in conjunction with the Telethon Kids Institute, a leading medical research organisation in Australia. It will involve screening 1000 people in schools throughout Timor-Leste to accurately gauge the incidence of rheumatic heart disease.

"Once we know the scope of the problem we can work with the government and non-government organisations to effectively tackle this destructive and preventable disease."

In conjunction with local partner Bairo Pite Clinic, East Timor Hearts Fund is also about to launch an expanded penicillin program, offering free medicine to those with early symptoms of rheumatic fever, to head off the development of rheumatic heart disease.

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