

Australian surgery lets East Timorese nurse take heart

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East Timorese paediatric nurse Teresinha da Costa has had a unique experience of the Australian public health system, undergoing a life-saving heart procedure in Melbourne this month, courtesy of the medical aid charity East Timor Hearts Fund.

Teresinha, who works at the Guido Valadares National Hospital in Dili, the capital of East Timor, has been accompanied by her doctor husband, Victor Sarmento. She had a technically complex procedure at Royal Melbourne Hospital on 13 April to repair a congenital defect in her heart.

“My husband and I have been very interested to see the Australian health system first-hand. We have always had great faith that God and the doctors in Melbourne would take care of me,” Teresinha said.

East Timor Hearts Fund honorary medical adviser Dr Noel Bayley said Teresinha, 28, suffered from patent ductus arteriosus (known as PDA), an abnormal connection between the large vessels in the chest near the heart. In a developed country this would usually be diagnosed and fixed in infancy.

“It causes enormous strain on the left ventricle, the heart’s main pumping chamber, and this will eventually cause it to fail,” Dr Bayley said.

“Teresinha has already had clinical heart failure in the past. Her outlook without this procedure was very grim.

“Unfortunately, while health facilities in Timor-Leste (East Timor) are improving all the time, currently it has no specialist cardiac facilities, which means overseas treatment is the only option for patients like Teresinha.

“As a skilled specialist nurse Teresinha can make an important contribution to the future of her country. All of us at East Timor Hearts Fund are delighted that we have been able to help give her that opportunity.”

East Timor Hearts Fund is the only medical aid charity dedicated to providing life-saving heart surgery in Australia for young people from Timor-Leste. Since 2010 it has conducted a dozen screening clinics in Timor-Leste and provided surgery or procedures for more than 30 patients, aged as young as 11.

Interventional cardiologist Dr Will Wilson said Teresinha was recovering well after last week’s successful PDA (patent ductus arteriosus) closure at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, which used a high-tech, expandable plug-like medical device.

“The PDA was at least twice as large as those we normally see, and at the upper limits of what we can close with devices, so it was a significant challenge for the medical team,” Dr Wilson said.

“We managed to close this defect without open-heart surgery, using a self-expanding cardiac plug made of Nitinol (an alloy of titanium and nickel) with polyester patches sewn inside.

“This was delivered via a three millimetre tube inserted into the femoral vein, at the top of the leg. The large size of Teresinha’s defect meant we needed to use a different plug to that normally deployed.

“The procedure was uncomplicated and Teresinha has made an excellent recovery. A cardiac ultrasound the day after the procedure revealed only a small amount of residual flow across the PDA. We would hope she notices a significant improvement in her symptoms, and closure of the duct will certainly lead to an improvement in her life expectancy.”

Teresinha said her heart disease had made her breathless and dizzy and left her unable to work or have more children.

“I am feeling so much better. I’m looking forward to getting back to nursing, but the most important thing is looking after my six-month old son. He is the only son that I have and I love him so much,” Teresinha said.

“I would like to say thank you very much to the doctors and donors who have helped me to get my heart treatment in Australia. But just to say thank you, for me it’s not enough, but I don’t know any other word to say. I just feel so grateful for what they have done for me. “

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