

Heart op gives Timorese schoolgirl a sporting chance

For immediate release: 4 November 2013

An East Timorese teenager who was gravely ill before a life-saving heart procedure in Melbourne last week is looking forward to playing volleyball.

East Timor Hearts Fund, a Warrnambool-based medical aid charity, arranged treatment for Joaninha da Silva Faria, 19, after its volunteer medical team identified her condition during clinics in Dili in August.

The secondary school student underwent a mitral balloon procedure – which involves inserting a special balloon via a catheter to inflate a damaged heart valve – at leading MonashHeart.

Now that she will no longer suffer from debilitating symptoms, or face the prospect of a greatly reduced life expectancy, Joaninha said she looked forward to getting back to school and sport.

"Having heart disease has made me feel so sad in my life. I could not really focus on my study because I had a cough and felt breathless all the time," Joaninha said.

Sponsor Toll Remote Logistics flew Joanina to Australia; leading surgeon Professor Richard Harper and the MonashHeart medical team donated their services; and medical technology company Medtronic donated the mitral balloon used in the procedure. Public donations paid for Joanina's accommodation and other costs.

East Timor Hearts Fund's volunteer medical adviser and founder, Warrnambool cardiologist Dr Noel Bayley, said it was very rewarding to mobilise aid to save a young life.

"There are many young people in East Timor with the hearts of 80 year olds, as a result of childhood rheumatic fever," Dr Bayley said.

"East Timor has no specialist cardiac facilities, so without the assistance of an NGO like ours this eminently treatable condition can and does take young lives."

Professor Harper, an Australian pioneer of the mitral balloon procedure, said he was delighted that Joaninha's procedure went well.

"No teenager should die from heart disease. It is extremely satisfying for all of us at MonashHeart to use our skills to make such a difference," Professor Harper said.

Dr Bayley thanked Professor Harper and MonashHeart, Toll Remote Logistics, Medtronic and the individual donors who pitched in to help Joaninha. East Timor Hearts Fund is also grateful to sponsor Macquarie Telecom for its support.

Joanina also expressed her appreciation: "I say thank you very much to the doctor and donors who have helped me, because they have saved my life."

East Timor Hearts Fund's next patient, Marta Soares Carvalho, 15, arrives in Australia this month for a mitral valve replacement. To make a tax deductible donation go to www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au.

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