

# Repaying the debt

This Warrnambool cardiologist may be absent-minded but his heart – and now those of many young Timorese – is in the right place. Interview: Jenny Brown.

**H**e's not quite the barefoot doctor because in his luggage Noel Bayley carries a portable echocardiograph machine. It's on loan from Noel's day job as a Warrnambool cardiologist. He knows his colleagues are more than generous in allowing him to tote around such an expensive piece of machinery on his frequent trips to East Timor, "especially since they know I'm a bit prone to leaving things behind on airport seats!"

The patients who come to see Noel ("nobody calls me Dr Bayley") in his outreach clinics around what is now called Timor Leste might well arrive barefoot. They may also have trekked for a day or more through difficult country to bring a debilitated child or relative to see him.

When he saw 16-year-old Maria Viegas, he says "she was tired and breathless all the time," Noel says. "She had a longstanding leaky aortic valve and as a result, her heart was severely enlarged and was beginning to fail. Without a valve replacement she

would have died of cardiac failure within a few years."

When Noel saw Flavia Gueterres last year, the 19-year-old was so weak from the effects of a narrowing heart valve, she too was on track to congestive heart failure.

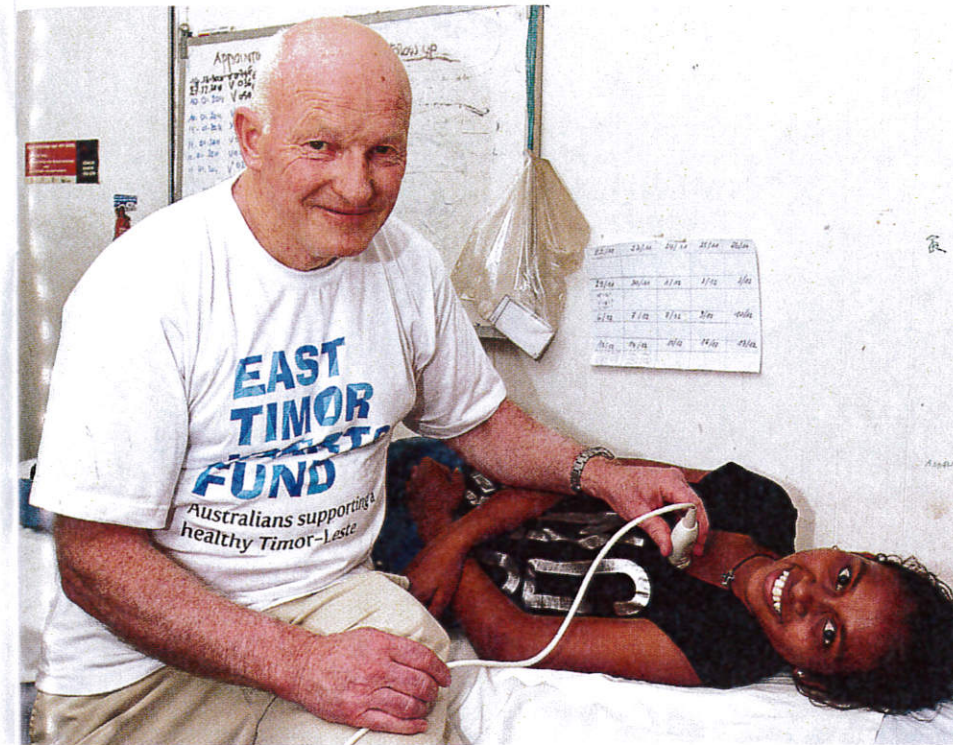
When Marciano Ximines Belo presented, the 23-year-old university student was short of breath and was having regular nose bleeds and palpitations. He told Noel: "When I am going to school, I feel like my life is not normal ... as normal people. I am always dizzy and have swollen feet, (and) because of that I always fall down at the school. I cannot study and do my activities at home like helping family."

In the decade he has been donating his spare time, travel expenses and specialist expertise to Timor Leste, Noel, 57, has met and helped hundreds of Timorese, young people who have developed heart disease as a result of childhood rheumatic fever and illnesses born of poverty, malnourishment, bad water and poor sanitation.

There are hundreds more who need treatment. In very basic clinical situations but with his travelling ECG machine on site, the visiting medico can pretty accurately make a diagnosis and define what treatments will be needed. Some of the life-saving heart surgeries can, he says, "be relatively simple procedures. Others can require multiple valve replacements, which is about as big an operation as you can have!"

Noel started doing this work in one of the world's newest republics and poorest countries in 2000 because, he says simply, "with the kids grown up, I had a little more time to spare". He and his wife Yve had a greater sense that "living in one of the most privileged countries in the world, anyone so lucky should be glad of the opportunity to give something back."

Noel and Yve (who is working on Timor water programs) chose Timor Leste because "they're our nearest neighbours, and it makes sense for Australians to



engage locally. Also, because Australians owe a debt to Timor relating to World War 2." Timor Leste welcomed his offer. "They were eager to have any help available."

Noel flies north two or three times each year. Yet while he can assess the heart problems, what he can effect while there is limited by relatively primitive clinical facilities. Increasingly, and since he has

established the medical aid organisation East Timor Hearts Fund (an endeavour which has subsequently attracted major corporate monetary sponsorship from Toll and support from his surgical colleagues), his young patients are being funded to travel to Australia for surgery.

Maria Viegas, the breathless 16-year-old, was recently brought to Royal Melbourne

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Hospital for valve replacement surgery. Her recovery was reward enough for the effort Noel and others put into facilitating her journey from sickness to health.

"Within days of the surgery," says Noel, "her symptoms were improved and her heart had reduced in size.

"She got her smile back. As she had gotten sicker and sicker, her smile had disappeared. She got it back. It doesn't get better than that!"

As we go to press, Marciano is about to have his surgery in Melbourne. He has hope in his heart as he writes: "If my heart disease can get cured, I will (be) very happy because I am going (to) be normal as my friends and I will think of my future. I will study hard and work hard to finish my school and I am going to develop my country. I have a good capacity and I am intelligent. Thank you. Thank you."

For more on how to help Noel's work, go to [www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au](http://www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au).

Jenny Brown is a Melbourne writer