

24 October 2019

Generous team provides Natalia with a new lease on life

Natalia Apaseray has spent a lifetime struggling to eat, drink and speak but Liverpool Hospital surgeons have helped put a smile back on the face of the West Papuan woman.

The 26-year-old was born with neurofibromatosis a condition that has resulted in the right side of her face being malformed.

Lead specialist and Liverpool Hospital plastic surgeon Dr Michael Kernohan said he had never seen a case as complex as Natalia's.

"Rotary flew Natalia to Australia late in 2018 for an intensive week of medical appointments and scans before she returned again in May as a humanitarian patient," Dr Kernohan said.

"It was a really eye-opening experience working with Rotary. Everyone has been outstanding in what they have given and Natalia has shown such courage.

"It was an amazingly complex and mammoth surgical procedure performed in one of our public hospitals which is testament to everyone involved."

Plastic surgeons, ear nose and throat surgeons, ophthalmologists, interventional radiologists, clinical psychologists and anaesthetists, as well as nursing staff cared for Natalia.

"All of them gave their time freely to treat and care for Natalia and Rotary covered her transport and accommodation needs, making this one great team effort," Dr Kernohan said.

"There are countless people who offered their time to be part of something that had never been done in a NSW hospital.

Natalia's surgeries in May and again in June involved the removal of a significant portion of the right side of her face, reconstruction of her face, nose mouth and eyelid.

"Natalia has been so brave throughout this unfamiliar journey and has not complained once. I wish her all the best. If she ever needs help, she knows where to find us," Dr Kernohan said.

Liverpool Hospital Head of Cardiothoracic Surgery Associate Professor Bruce French said what was achieved at Liverpool Hospital to help Natalia was on par with the conjoined twins, Nima and Dawa, who were flown to Melbourne from Bhutan for separation last year.

"Planning for Natalia's care started 18 months before she came to Australia. I want to commend Liverpool Hospital, the support from management and the Chief Executive for making this possible," he said.

The Rotary Clubs of Liverpool West, Bendigo Strathdale and Phnom Penh collaborated to support all transport, appointments and accommodation arrangements for Natalia and her carer Ema Ondofo.

QUOTES from NATALIA APERASAY:

"I felt a lot of shame growing up in Jayapura because of my face."

"I am so happy to be going back to see my community in Jayapura."

"I have a mask to wear to help with my recovery." (A second skin to help reduce swelling)

"I no longer feel the need to hide my face."

"I want to say thank you so very much to Rotary."

"Thank you for preparing the hospital."

"Thank you so much to Liverpool Hospital for your willingness and love to help."

"You are like family."

"There is no way I can pay everyone back for how they have helped."