

Medics on a mission bringing smiles to young faces

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SO what do you say to a subsistence farmer who has walked his family four hours to catch a bus for a daylong trip he can't afford to seek life-changing surgery for his three kids struggling with facial disfigurements – but the waiting room is full and surgery list already overflowing?

If you are Adelaide clinicians in East Timor you say: “Welcome, we're here to help.”

In a low-key, no-frills mercy mission earlier this month an Adelaide surgical team returned to East Timor yet again for a week of intense work repairing faces and changing lives.

Word went out including on TV that the team would be in Dili at the National Guido Valadares Hospital – and people who generally don't earn actual money found cash for bus trips from the bush, carrying hope as well as disfigured children.

On the first Saturday about 60 patients were seen and assessed as families filed in patiently, hopefully, to the hospital.

Some were burns victims, some with other issues, most were kids with cleft palates and cleft lips.

The subsistence farmer arrived with his kids late in the afternoon. How do you say “Sorry, we're full?”

Cleft palates and lips are relatively easy and cheap to repair. But if you are on a subsistence farm, not having the treatment done early in life can mean trouble eating, talking and breathing, trouble at school and working, and later in life being ostracised as “different” – not to mention the loss of self-confidence as a happy kid becomes a troubled teen.

Adelaide's volunteer life-changers do the surgery in their own time, at negligible cost, and have been doing it for decades.

In a clue to their selfless culture they are quick to credit an earlier pioneer as the man on whose shoulders they stand.

Leprosy physician Dr John Hargrave who worked in Aboriginal communities from his



GIVING THEIR TIME: Anaesthetist Dr Brian Spain prepares a patient for surgery with local assistants; and the team examines patients. Pictures: Zameer Gill. **BELOW LEFT:** One of the hand-knitted toys made by aged-care residents at SA's Philip Kennedy Centre to comfort the children.

Darwin base started going to East Timor in the 1990s when it was part of Indonesia, building trust and relationships in a tricky part of the world.

Dr Mark Moore from Adelaide lucked in to Dr Hargrave's last visit in 1999, and has been returning there

regularly as well as to West Timor and Flores in Indonesia. Which brings us to this trip.

Craniofacial surgeon Dr Moore had been going to East Timor several times a year for the past 20 years, though he has eased back recently with responsibilities including becoming head of the Australian Craniofacial Unit at Adelaide's Women's and Children's Hospital.

The latest trip was under the auspices of OSSAA – the Overseas Specialist Surgical Association of Australia, an Unley-based charity whose work has helped result in more than 5000 lifesaving or life-changing operations in East Timor and Indonesia.

The tax-deductible charity was originally based in Darwin but as most clinicians were coming from

Adelaide it relocated in 2002. Dr Moore was joined by plastic and reconstructive surgical resident Dr Zameer Gill, on his second trip to East Timor, anaesthetist Dr Brian Spain from Darwin, nurse Joy Booth, anaesthetic recovery nurse Sandy Grixiti and speech pathologist Lai Celina.

The week-long trip cost about \$12,000 for airfares, accommodation

