

# Straightening a Spine

A big team effort for one small boy, Alberto, who can now stand straight

Delivering specialist surgical visits and ensuring the smooth running of the Australia Timor Leste Assistance for Specialist services (ATLASS) Program is all part of a day's work for Elvis Guterres and Sarmento Faus Correia, the Timorese staff employed by the College of Surgeons' AusAID funded international development program in Timor Leste.

One of their recent tasks has been helping Alberto Matos Paivo Freitas, travel to the Ganga hospital, Coimbatore, India to undergo life changing spine-straightening surgery.

From organising medical visas and international money transfers, to reassuring and informing the family of ongoing developments; helping Alberto to stave off home sickness in a foreign country and providing a long distance translation service between Dili and Coimbatore so that the non-English speaking Alberto could communicate with his doctors and nurses, Elvis and Sarmento worked tirelessly to ensure that Alberto's experience was as trouble-free as possible.

Alberto's home in Gari-Uai, Baucau district is located approximately three hours east of the capital, Dili. The journey to India has involved a series of physical and emotional challenges as he and his older sister Dulce left Timor Leste and their family for the first time and spent several weeks at the Ganga hospital in Coimbatore, while Alberto underwent surgery.

The 16-year-old boy first presented to orthopaedic surgeon, Dr David McNicol, with a severe curvature of the spine during an Orthopaedic specialist visit to Baucau hospital supported by the ATLASS Program. Probably caused by tuberculosis, Alberto had lived with this problem since age four, however increased



Elvis Guterres, Alberto (front), Dulce Freitas, his older sister who accompanied him to India, their Aunt and carer (name to follow) and Sarmento Faus Corriea

breathlessness and pain led the family to seek further treatment from the visiting Orthopaedic team.

The surgery Alberto required was not available in Timor Leste. Dr McNicol recalled a presentation he had seen at the Asia-Pacific Orthopaedic conference that had won an award for most innovative procedure. The topic: "New developments in straightening spines bent by tuberculosis" from a doctor at the Ganga hospital, Coimbatore, India. The talk discussed the benefits of a treatment approach that involved single spine-straightening procedure.

Contact was made with the Ganga hospital through the Children First Foundation (CFF) Australia, a not-for-profit organisation that supports international medical treatment for disadvantaged children. CFF also supported the costs of Alberto and Dulce's airfares and transfers.

The surgeons were able to treat Alberto with a single procedure called an 'Opening-closing Wedge Osteotomy'. This involves simultaneously accessing the affected portion of the spine from the front and the back. Latest technology in this area means that the spine

can be straightened further than was previously thought possible without a risk of damaging the spinal cord as the spinal cord response is monitored at all times during the surgery.

The surgery and all related costs for Alberto and Dulce's stay at the Ganga hospital was subsidised through 'Project Swasam, a community outreach program provided by the hospital'. Swasam, a Tamil word is loosely translated as "Caring for life". The program provides spinal surgery free of charge to people affected by tuberculosis and unable to pay the medical costs required for treatment.

Doctors at the Ganga hospital agreed that the surgery was an outstanding success. Alberto's spine has now been straightened to 40 degrees from a previous curvature of 116 degrees.

Upon return to Timor and standing much taller, he will return to secondary schooling in Baucau district. He looks forward to being able to help his family and play sport with his friends without losing his breath. As a result of this surgery and the team effort to get Alberto to India and back to Timor he will be able to lead a more active and productive life.