

Child with repaired bilateral cleft lip



Photo of a young girl in a remote village taken 18 months previously



## Healing Timor

Dealing with the people is the highlight for us; they are the moments that we enjoy

When respected surgical philanthropist and plastic surgeon Mr John Hargrave first began his medical aid missions to East Timor, he was not only one of the few outsiders to find a way in to the politically isolated country, but one of few surgeons willing to brave the dangers of social unrest to treat those in need.

The East Timorese, then under Indonesian control, were wary of strangers, yet over time, through the consistency of his visits and his determination to assist the local population, Mr Hargrave built a relationship of trust and welcome with some of the most disadvantaged people in the world.

In those early years, Mr Hargrave worked under the banner of, and with funding from, the charitable organisation he established called

the Australian South East Asia Rehabilitation Service. Then upon his retirement in 1999, the program was renamed the Overseas Specialist Surgical Association of Australia (OSSAA) and the reins were handed to South Australian plastic surgeon Mr Mark Moore.

This year marks the 10 year anniversary of that hand-over, when Mr Moore, Sr Margaret Flemming and Mr Hargrave signed an agreement with the International Committee of the Red Cross to provide plastic surgical services to Dili National Hospital. Funding for the work that is now done in both East and West Timor and Flores is provided through the College co-ordinated Australian and Timor Leste program of Assistance for Specialist Services (ATLASS) with attached funding from AusAid and through private donations given to OSSAA.

*“Dr Ximenes has very good technical skills and is himself a living symbol of East Timor’s recent history having lived in the mountains as a young boy following the Indonesian takeover.”*



Above: Dr Joao Ximenes and Mr Mateus (theatre nurse) performing a cleft lip repair.  
Right: Dr Joao Ximenes, Mr Bernardo, Dr Mark Moore and Dr David Sainsbury at Los Palos clinic



“When I first went to East Timor with John Hargrave it was clear how valued he was by the people, not only for his surgical skills, but for the consistency of his visits and his care,” Mr Moore said.

“The country had gone through such great upheaval in the years since he began visiting with the Dili Hospital, for instance, starting out under Indonesian control, then passing to the International Committee of the Red Cross, to various Non-Government Organisations, to a United Nations structure to finally now being run by the East Timorese government.

“We remain one of the most consistent services to visit East Timor and that means we have been able to build a system in which people have come to know what skills and services we can offer.

“At the beginning, people brought in children with colds or polio or cerebral palsy because they were desperate for whatever help they could get, but over time they came to understand what conditions and injuries we could treat and when we could do it.

“With such monumental change in their recent history it’s understandable that consistency has been the key to establishing the necessary relationships to allow us to help the people we can help as effectively as possible.”

Since that hand-over 10 years ago, Mr Moore has undertaken 27 clinical visits to the region, conducted more than 2,500 consultations and performed 981 surgical procedures including 540 cleft lip and palate surgeries and 160 operations to treat burn contractures.

In the past year, the program has taken another crucial step in its development with the decision to train an East Timorese general surgical trainee in cleft surgery.

“Some time ago a few of us involved in OSSAA sat down to discuss what we could do to get more of this work done in our absence and we came up with the idea of following the model of the eye teams who visit the region who train people to do cataract surgery,” Mr Moore said.

“We agreed that we should come up with a variation on that in terms of training a local general surgeon to perform cleft lip and palate repair. Dr Joao Ximenes was identified by the resident team as the ideal person for this, so we got to work.”

Dr Ximenes’ formal training commenced in March last year and since then he has accompanied and worked with plastic surgical teams on three visits to Timor Leste (funded by AusAID) and one visit to West Timor (funded by OSSAA).

“Dr Ximenes has now performed 20 unilateral cleft repairs in that year, the last four cases as surgeon with me there watching, but not scrubbed,” Mr Moore said.

“He has also assumed control of post operative management and follow-up and we hope soon for him to start performing such surgery when the team is not available and to gradually increase his range of surgical procedures over the next two years.

“This is a very pleasing development because there are so many people in need of this surgery in the region, yet it can take a generation for a country to produce the specialists needed so we felt that if there was a way to speed this up in one area of urgent need that would be most worthwhile.

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The program managed by the College will continue to fund Dr Ximenes to go to Australia and other appropriate countries for short-term training attachments over the next few years.

Mr Moore who works out of the Women’s and Children’s Hospital in Adelaide and the Royal Adelaide Hospital, said working in the region remained, even after so many visits over the past ten years, a pleasure and a privilege. He enjoys the camaraderie that has grown over time within the core group of team volunteers including other surgeons, anaesthetists and nurses as well as the opportunity to experience such a vastly different way of life as that lived by the people of East and West Timor.

“There is a hospital on the east end of Flores which is run by nuns and that has been there for 70 years, which is not only the cleanest and best run hospital in the region, but a little paradise in the middle of nowhere,” he said.

“We started working there last year, again through the generosity of the couple from the UK, and it was a marvellous experience. There is a nursing school attached to the hospital with the nurses wearing their starched white uniforms and caps and it was like stepping back in time.

“The entire region is quite beautiful and most of us who attend these visits have fallen into a pattern of going for a walk in the early morning through the streets and markets, absorbing local life.

“I take photographs and on one recent visit I took a beautiful photo of a girl in a paddy field and on my last visit in March I took it back, went back to the same area and showed it to the people I met. Everyone knew her and ran off to find her and she was delighted when I gave it to her.

“Dealing with the people is the highlight for us; they are the moments that we enjoy and even help ease the burden of seeing people in great need that we have only a limited capacity to help.”