

MEDICAL MARVEL

The Children First Foundation has ensured that Ivan-Joe Leo from Papua New Guinea can look forward to a new life. **Nicole Precel** explains.

# Second chance at life

## SURGERY SAVES 'DOUBLEHEAD' BOY

WHEN IVAN-JOE Leo arrived in Australia, his future was uncertain. The 14-month-old from Papua New Guinea couldn't crawl or sit independently. He could hardly speak.

A large lump on his head full of fluid was putting pressure on his brain.

And it wasn't just causing a developmental delay, it was potentially killing him as it continued to grow to the size of a football.

Six months since Ivan-Joe arrived with his mother, Joselyn Sari, he has a new head and a new chance at life, thanks to two remarkable surgeries at the Monash Children's Hospital and the help of Moira Kelly's Children First Foundation.

The foundation brings children from developing countries to Australia for life-changing operations with surgeons, doctors, nurses and volunteers who donate their time and resources.

This includes Dandenong hospital and, most recently, Monash Children's Hospital.

Neurosurgeon Chris Xenos said Ivan-Joe probably suffered a fractured skull during a difficult labour, causing a traumatic cranial encephalocele.

After visiting the hospital in PNG, Ms Sari found she could not afford surgery for her son and the

facilities required for the delicate operation were not available.

So she contacted Interplast Australia and her case was referred to the foundation.

With the help of the Monash Children's Hospital and its staff, Ivan-Joe's first surgery took place in March.

Dr Xenos said the treatment required a multi-disciplinary approach, involving therapists, plastic surgeons, ward nurses and anaesthetists that would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

He said the surgery took "a bit longer" and was more complex than expected.

During the first operation, surgeons inserted a shunt to drain the fluid from Ivan-Joe's head through to his stomach.

"Just by lowering fluid in his brain, which is no longer under pressure, it was more relaxed and the consequence of that is his neurological condition improved," Dr Xenos said.

The fluid lump disappeared and with his skull having formed around the fluid, Ivan-Joe's head caved in like a crater, about 10-15cm wide.

Leader visited Ivan-Joe and his mother a week after the first surgery and found he was already more alert, playful and mobile.

Ms Sari said when she first saw



the swelling reduce, she was scared, but her fear soon subsided.

"I'm very happy. I don't have any fear, like if there's something going to go wrong or he's going to die or all this, I don't have these doubts," Ms Sari said.

She said her son had been ostracised in PNG and his condition had been difficult for the whole family.

"The others, they used to say, 'we want to see the baby with the two heads', that's what they used to call him, or doublehead," she said. "It made me so angry."

Three weeks after the first operation, surgeons, including Charles Baillieu, performed the most difficult of Ivan-Joe's procedures — an

eight-hour cranial repair and reconstruction operation.

Dr Xenos said surgeons used about 50 absorbable screws and plates and 20 strips of skull bone to reconstruct his head.

"We used the patient's own skull bone, drilled it off, remodelled it on a bench, cut it into pieces and stretched it, and like a quilt put it back together," Dr Xenos said.

He said there was some concern about infection and Ivan-Joe was put on prolonged antibiotics.

"His wounds have healed nicely, his skull profile looks much better and his mother reckons he's still continuing to thrive, be more vocal and active, and I'd like to think his

development would improve over time," he said.

"To see him now is so worthwhile and we've picked up great experience from this."

Ms Sari said ongoing physiotherapy has helped her son crawl and move more independently, and if supported, he could almost walk.

"After the surgery, they say 'OK, you can go and see Ivan', and he was a new Ivan," Ms Sari said.

"It's like I have a new son."

She said the pair would soon return to PNG.

Watch Ivan-Joe's amazing journey online at [dandenongleader.com.au](http://dandenongleader.com.au)

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