

How a Melbourne surgeon saved

WALK LIKE A MAN

When John Griffiths first met 16-year-old Panu Suga in Papua New Guinea, he wondered how the boy was able to even stand up. After five years of red tape and a marathon operation, Panu will return to his village walking tall. **Brigid O'Connell** and photographer **Jay Town** spent a life-changing year with him.

From Page 81

Many other patients had walked or canoed for more than a week for their chance to see the doctors, after word spread along the "tok savy" grapevine.

"When you walk in, you don't really know who's going to walk through the door," Mr Griffiths said.

"What we see there is what they see in Africa, Indonesia and other third world countries and it's right on our doorstep; unique problems that you never see in Australia."

When Panu walked through the door, Mr Griffiths said he remembered being astonished by the severity of his bowed legs.

"I had this concept when I first saw Panu that he was about 12, but he was actually 16 despite him looking like a child.

"He couldn't walk too far at all."

Panu was diagnosed with Blount's disease, a growth disorder of the legs that is occasionally seen in Australia but fixed easily at birth.

Instead - in a country 90 minutes away from Australia by air - the disability meant Panu had been forced to abandon his education after primary school.

That was partly because he struggled to walk there, but also because disabilities are viewed through the cultural prism of taboos, spirits and curses.

He instead spent his teenage years helping his father in a mechanic's workshop, carrying logs and working for his family in the fields.

While his twin brother Albert had been a continual source of strength and companionship, Panu said the direct comparison of "what could have been - with his brother graduating from school, getting married and becoming a father - was a little hard to accept.



Bones can be moved, shaved and sliced with relative ease in Australia, whereas Papua New Guinea's health system is focused on the acute.

In a country where malaria is still the third biggest killer and patients with third-degree burns from hut fires present for help every day, there is neither the capacity, expertise or specialist equipment to treat complex cases like Panu.

But Mr Griffiths knew that if he could get Panu to his home theatre in Malvern, he could change the course of this young man's life.

It took about three years to navigate through the forest of red tape to get the then 19-year-old to Australia.

On May 1 last year - with theatre space donated by Cabrini and medical staff who had volunteered their time - Panu endured his first operation. Over four hours Mr Griffiths and fellow surgeon Minoo Patel first cut the shin bone at an angle below the knee, moving it in line with the thigh bone to correct about 40 per cent of

the deformity. Bone from his hip was taken to fill the wedge at the top of the tibia, before a steel chamber - called the Taylor Spatial Frame - was pinned through the bone in the lower leg.

Millimetre by millimetre, the cogs on the frame were turned each day to correct the angle of Panu's legs over 10 weeks; lengthening some parts and shortening others.

It was critical that was done slowly to allow the skin, muscles, nerves and blood vessels to stretch.

The frame was kept on for another eight weeks to allow the bone to heal.

The complicated procedure was repeated on the other leg four months later in September.

The original plan was to get started on the second leg before the frame on the first leg was removed, getting both operations done in four months.

But the pain of the first operation meant it was unrealistic to have both frames on at once.

Moira Kelly recalled how they made three emergency calls to paramedics after the first operation because of the pain.

