

‘Apple was ashamed because

# This little girl's life has changed forever thanks to Aussie surgeons

By SARAH RHODES

THIS time last week, Apple Hallazgo rarely spoke and was too frightened to go to school.

Teased by her classmates because she was born with a cleft palate, the 10-year-old faced a bleak future living in a small village on the Philippine island of Mindanao.

But six days ago, a visiting team of Australian doctors — including two leading Sydney plastic surgeons — performed the relatively simple operation that will change her life.

Apple's schoolteacher, Mary Ann A-Abut, explained the pain the little girl had to endure in the playground.

“Apple was ashamed because of her voice,” she said. “Her classmates teased her.”

Eventually, Apple refused to go to school. As she faced a life of torment, her family decided to do anything they could to help find a cure for her deformity.

With little money, they travelled for four hours on public transport and took their place among a crowd waiting outside the Northern Mindanao Medical Centre.

Like all the other parents seeking treatment for their children with cleft lips and palates or severe burns, they waited in the hope that Apple would be accepted for treat-



**Saviours:** Dr Michael McGlynn and Dr Peter Haertsch review Apple Hallazgo after her surgery

ment by the visiting Australian doctors.

The team — comprising two surgeons, two anaesthetists and a theatre nurse — said later they had been overwhelmed by the spirit shown by local people.

“They're grateful — they're all saying thank you and writing little notes,” Sydney plastic surgeon Dr Michael McGlynn said.

“You really feel appreci-

ated. If they have a deformity, no matter what you, as a doctor do, they'll be happy.”

Dr McGlynn said that in Australia, it was harder for patients to appreciate “cosmetic results” because of the perception of beauty.

Dr Peter Haertsch, head of plastic surgery at Sydney's Concord Hospital and director of the NSW Burns Unit, said something as simple as watching a child drink with a straw

for the first time was a wonderful reward.

“When you see a child sipping a drink with a straw, you know you've had the desired outcome,” Dr Haertsch said.

“You can't drink with a straw if you have a cleft palate.”

Dr Haertsch drives a Bentley, but this display of wealth belies his generous spirit.

He has given up many of his holidays to make 26 trips overseas to perform operations.

# of her voice. Her classmates teased her,



**Brighter future:** Apple with sibling Jhinges (left) and friends Richelle Jalo and Joclene Obomio (above), and nurse Dee McGlynn — who travels everywhere with her husband — and Princess Ladao on the operating table waiting for surgeon Michael McGlynn to operate

*Pictures: Sarah Rhodes*



"It's a whole sea change," Dr Haertsch said. "We're able to operate on many more patients here because conditions are different.

"I did five patients today. I wouldn't do that many at home."

But for every child the surgeons help, many are turned away. The team members face the disheartening prospect of simply not having enough time and resources to treat all those who come seeking their assistance.

The medics are also aware that, as recently as 20 years ago in this region, children with cleft palates were treated as outcasts who had been "touched by a devil".

Apple's cleft palate made it almost impossible for her to speak properly or eat solid food.

By grade two, Apple had become too ashamed to face her peers and refused to go to school. Yet even with the operation behind her, she faces many challenges.

Apple's aunt, Teresita Baconguis, told *The Sunday Telegraph* that ongoing speech therapy would be difficult.

"She is 10 already," Mrs Baconguis said. "She should have had the operation when she was two or three years old.

"There is a speech therapist at the Philippine Society of Mercy Foundation, but it's very far from her village. Maybe she can go at weekends or on public holidays."

When Australian surgeons began visiting this area in 1998, they faced difficult operating condi-

tions, working in concrete-floored theatres with flaking paint and holes in the walls.

Joining Dr McGlynn and Dr Haertsch on this visit are theatre nurse Dee McGlynn — who travels everywhere with her husband — and anaesthetists Dr Vernon Moo, from Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital and Dr Tony Kirkwood, from Orange Base Hospital.

"The operations we do are life-changing. It enables them to be normal children and have a sense of self-worth," Dr Kirkwood said.

Prospective patients are given health checks before being assessed by the surgeons to ensure they are healthy enough to endure an operation.

The chosen ones spend the

night sleeping on stretchers crammed into one of the hospital's corridors. Their relatives, who sleep beside them on plastic chairs, are forced to bring their own food because they can't afford to buy from the hospital.

Many children who come for treatment are burns victims who have such severe injuries they cannot move their arms away from their bodies.

The incidence of cleft palates is also higher in Asia than in Australia, with one in 500 babies suffering the deformity compared to one in 700 here.

Apple made the four-hour return journey on public transport to her village just one day after her operation.

Her parents have little work and four other children to care for, but at least Apple's future is a little brighter.

"Everyone is excited to have her back. We missed her very much," Apple's best friend, Richelle, said. "She is thoughtful and kind."

Apple is looking forward to returning to school next week for the first time in two years.

Interplast is run by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in Melbourne, with funding provided by donations from charitable organisations such as Rotary. To donate, call 03 9249 1231 or e-mail [interplast@surgeons.org](mailto:interplast@surgeons.org)

**Sarah Rhodes travelled to the Philippines courtesy of Interplast.**