

## **AGM 2023: Chair report**

### **Overview/Introduction**

Welcome all, to the new Children First support office here on levels 17 and 24, 570 Bourke Street. It is so gratifying to have you join us this morning.

As you know, Children First remains dedicated to treating an increasing number of children from developing countries who cannot access the medical care they desperately need. We continued to do this over the last year by delivering surgery here in Australia and expanding on our overseas surgery capacity.

### **Context**

As you know, Covid was a rough time for the Foundation, and the ongoing effects on the Australian, and particularly Victorian, health system are and will be long-running and significant to Children First. We thank you for sticking by us, and with your ongoing support, we are navigating these barriers to treating more children and looking forward to what opportunities lie ahead.

As a result of Covid we have had to look at our strategies that are there to determine our way forward. In this year's supporter survey, almost all of our supporters discussed how important it is to be part of long-term solutions for communities to 'teach a man to fish' and to treat children, where possible, in their home country, in addition to treating children here in Australia.

We are at a turning point right now. Pre Covid, 20-23 both locally and overseas, this was a big year for us. I am pleased to say that in the 2022-2023 year, we have completed 33 cases and provided 23 life-changing or life-saving surgeries. This is a 57% increase on the previous year's cases.

This is a significant achievement by the team members here in Australia and overseas.

### **Highlights**

This has seen some wonderful outcomes and acknowledgements –

- from international heads of state, like President Jose Ramos-Horta, who has heralded us for our work in Timor Leste
- the Government of Samoa who has come to us specifically for advice and support to help them with Samoan children who are most in need
- universities like RMIT and Melbourne University who have partnered with us, assisting us with pro bono research so that we can increase our impact
- partnering with the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons to address some of the underlying barriers to children accessing medical care in their own

country, by working together on low-cost, high-impact capacity building, delivering life-support training, and saving lives in PNG.

- following the success of last year's launch of the Back Home Support Program, providing five children post-surgery with education, welfare, and additional medical support to reach their goals
- working with Child Safeguard to assess and audit every aspect of our work, facilities, policies, procedures and team to ensure we are always 'child safe'
- to expansion to have In-Country Partners permanently in 6 countries: Vanuatu, PNG, Timor Leste, the Philippines, Vietnam and Zambia

## **Finance**

As you will see in Rob's Treasurer's address, fundraising income is bouncing back post-COVID. Thanks to one of our very kind supporters, Veronica Greenberg, or 'Roni' as she was better known, for leaving a generous bequest. I encourage other members to consider leaving their legacy through Children First – We have seen this year the difference this makes to the lives of children from developing countries. This year, we have seen a reduction in the availability of paediatric beds in Victoria. We are experiencing significant increases in medical costs and a dramatic decrease in the availability of pro bono beds, notably increasing our core operating costs. Regardless, the team has done well in driving down other areas of expenditure, regardless of these significant and tangible market forces.

## **Future**

As we look to the future in 2023-2024 and beyond, we are working hard to overcome these barriers to help as many children as possible have access to life-changing surgery to allow them to have opportunities to contribute to their communities and flourish.

We are working to ensure our work is, at every point, appropriate and safe, grounded in what is in the best interests of each child. We are increasingly working to ensure that we get the most cost-effective use of our supporters funding and generous support. This means always challenging ourselves to look at what we are doing, and how we can do it better. To provide the best care in a changing world, we must look at what is best for the children now and in the future. We need to learn from the past but not have it confine our direction.

Medical and surgical care is very different today from 24 years ago in the early days of Children First. Advancements in Australia, like minimally invasive surgery, have delivered better outcomes for our children. For complex and critical cases, our focus continues to be on bringing the children to Australia. Likewise, there have been advancements in developing countries. So, where possible, working with a select number of overseas hospitals and organisations meeting our clinical governance standards, we are increasingly facilitating surgery and treatment in-country. This allows children to access surgery more quickly, at a fraction of the cost, while reducing the disruption to the child and family, the cultural trauma of relocating to Australia and being able to have quality surgery and treatment while surrounded by the support of loving friends and family and is a win-win.

For more complex surgery that needs to come to Australia, early intervention in-country can also alleviate some immediate pain and distress for children and expedite the more complicated part of their treatments when they eventually get to Australia.

We will do what we can to ensure that the story of unmet surgical need is constantly improving and that the future holds more promise for the children still to come. This means we can focus on bringing the more complicated cases here, to Australia, where the medical capability is up with the finest in the world. And we will work with partners across the country to deliver the best possible outcomes for more and more children.

## **Thank you**

There are so many people that make Children First possible. I would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to you, our members. I cannot thank you enough for your continued support through these challenging times.

To our incredible team of medical and allied health professionals and hospitals – we cannot thank you enough for your commitment to the children this year. Special thanks to:

### **Victoria:**

- Epworth Healthcare
- Monash Children's Hospital
- Mulgrave Private Hospital
- Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne
- St John of God Hospital Berwick
- St Vincent's Private Hospital

### **New South Wales:**

- Children's Hospital, Westmead
- Sydney Children's Hospital, Randwick

### **South Australia:**

- Women's and Children's Hospital

### **Northern Territory:**

- Royal Darwin Hospital

We also need to express our immense gratitude to the following organisations who have continued their generous support of Children First in the last year:

- Rotary, our founding partner
- Perpetual Trustees
- Lamers Foundation
- Equity Trustees and the Scobie and Claire Mackinnon Trust
- Smorgan Families Foundation
- Kiwanis Australia
- Bendigo Bank
- Myer Foundation
- And to the Australian Communities Foundation for joining us for the first time.

And our probono partners during the year:

- GDJ
- Kingston Reid
- Ashurst
- Signature Flooring
- Ortho Kids
- Fair Share
- Second bite

Thanks to all our volunteers who help us care for and educate children in Melbourne, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory, as well as our in-country partners. Thanks to those who help organise and run our events, like this year's Gala Ball and Adelaide lunch. And thanks to those who do 'invisible' work behind the scenes like research, deliveries and Medical Review Panel meetings. Your input is also so important to what we do and where we are going. You, too, are seen and very much appreciated.

I want to acknowledge our dedicated, passionate, and dynamic team of staff and Board members. You face every challenge with dedication to ensure the children we care for remain at the heart of all we do. Your passion and commitment to treating more and more children enables these miracles to happen every day. Thank you.

With the continued support of our wonderful Children First family, we look forward to ensuring more children can access essential surgical care, regardless of where they were born.

**Roger Langley**  
**Chairman**  
**Children First Foundation**