

# A gift from Melbourne: a fresh face

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MELBOURNE surgeons have given a new lease of life to an Albanian woman who was horribly disfigured by a massive birthmark.

Sanie Neli, 43, led a normal life until adolescence, when her purple birthmark began growing — like a tumour — through her face and neck.

In early 2005, Sanie was “discovered” in her home country by Moira Kelly of the Children First Foundation and brought to Australia for a series of operations over 15 months. She spent, in total, more than two months in hospital.

St Vincent’s and Mercy Private microsurgeon Tony Penington, who did most of the surgery, said it was an extremely delicate procedure as post-surgery swelling could have blocked Ms Neli’s airway. The birthmark had also grown through vital arteries and muscles in her neck and face, which added to the difficulty in removing it. Even today, part of it has had to remain.

“I had never seen anything like it,” Mr Penington said. “We



**BEFORE:** Sanie Neli last year.

managed to take off most of it. It ran through to her throat and right around her neck. It was the most awful thing. At the back of the neck it was chronically infected. We worked all the way around, taking off pieces at a time while protecting her vascular system. We’ve had to leave some of it so muscles could continue to work around her mouth, otherwise she’d dribble and have trouble eating.”

At a press conference yesterday, Ms Neli — through an



**AFTER:** Ms Neli after nine operations.

interpreter — thanked Mr Penington and Ms Kelly for her “new life”. She returns to her family — whom she has not seen since she left Albania — at the end of the month.

Ms Neli said her disfigurement caused her to become extremely introverted and she would stay away from people, even visitors in the family home.

Doctors in Albania could not operate for fear of damaging her sight, hearing, or both, she said.

“I look in the mirror all the

time just to make sure it’s not a dream,” she said.

“I’m going to miss all my second family here and all the people that have helped me. I will never forget them. I am extremely happy.”

She said she was now comfortable with her self-image and could walk down the street knowing people were not staring.

Ms Kelly was in Europe when she was alerted to Ms Neli’s plight. “I knew I had to get hold of Sanie when I saw her image on the computer. Sanie’s is just the saddest case and it’s been a hell of a journey. Her birthmark was the most graphic thing I’d ever seen,” she said.

Ms Neli has also had skin grafts, taken from her thigh, to cover the remaining birthmark.

Mr Penington said it was originally a normal type of facial birthmark, similar to the one borne by, for example, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. For such a birthmark to swell to that size was extremely rare, he said.

Mr Penington said he did not know what would happen to it in the future. “We’ve done all we can do for the moment.”

