

# Brave boys tackle life after surgery

# Thanks, Melbourne

Heading home: Belal Barbakh (left) and Van Hien Nguyen are going home after the Children's First Foundation obtained life-saving surgery for them.

Picture: ALEX COPPEL



THESE two boys from either side of the world wouldn't be alive today if not for the help of Victorians.

Palestinian Belal Barbakh, 16, was horrifically burnt at age three when he fell into a fire caused by fighting in Gaza.

And Vietnamese boy Van Hien Nguyen, 14, arrived in Melbourne with a rare "moon-faced obesity" that would have killed him.

But with the help of Melbourne charity Children's First Foundation and the generosity of Melbourne surgeons, they are returning home this weekend with a chance at life.

Belal has been in Melbourne for two years receiving treatment for his burns and disfigurement on the right side of his body where he was badly burned.

Melbourne plastic surgeon Chris Coombs, who has overseen Belal's treatment, said the young man had had many skin grafts and operations, including recontouring of his scalp and removal of a toe to make a thumb.

Mr Coombs said Linacre Private Hospital had donated its services for some of the surgeries.

"I am very excited about my hand," Belal said. "But I am more happy about my wig."

Burns mean Belal's hair will not grow back over most of his body.

**SUELLEN HINDE**  
Health reporter

And little Hien was also smiling about his new found health.

Royal Children's Hospital Professor Garry Warne became aware of Hien's case on a visit to Vietnam.

"Hien would have certainly died if not for the surgery," RCH Prof Warne said. "He suffers from a rare disease — it creates a short stature, bone failure, high blood pressure and muscle wastage, severely impairing his development."

**'Before the surgery, he never smiled and that depression was a characteristic of the disease'**

**PROF GARRY WARNE  
ON VAN HIEN NGUYEN**

Hien has been in Melbourne for two months with his mother, Lien Thuy Thi Pham.

Prof Warne and the RCH team removed Hien's adrenal glands to counter the illness: "Before the surgery, he never smiled and that depression was a characteristic of the disease."

