

Eight hours of surgery gives Eman a new outlook for life

Andra Jackson

FOR most of her life, Eman Tabaza has rarely smiled. Born in Gaza, the eight-year-old had a bulging tumour behind her nose and forehead, the result of a rare birth defect. It made her feel like an outcast among other children.

But after three months in Australia, Eman's life has been transformed. She has a new face, thanks to the skill of a cranio-facial surgical team at the Royal Children's Hospital.

The team, led by cranio-facial surgeon Anthony Holmes, carried out an intricate, eight-hour operation, giving Eman a new forehead and moving her eye sockets five centimetres.

Before the operation, Eman was nervous and bewildered. After it, she waited until she had left hospital to recuperate before examining her face, on her own, in a bathroom mirror.

She was well pleased. Speaking through an interpreter, Iman Riman, she said that when she returns to Gaza next week the playmates who used to taunt her as the "mother of all noses" would be in for a big surprise.

Eman is one of five Palestinian children flown to Australia in August for surgery on devastating injuries or deformities.

Her abnormality was one of the rarer facial cleft cases, said Mr Holmes. She was born with half her nose missing and a hole in her brain with some protruding brain matter.

A tumour behind her forehead produced facial swelling and an "enormous" gulf of seven centimetres between the corner of each eye. She had only one functioning nostril.

To complicate matters, she had been operated in on Egypt, where doctors tried to plug the gap behind her nose with a graft from her right ear. "But that really didn't solve the problem," Mr Holmes said.

The hospital team set out to ensure her brain was back in place, rebuild her eye sockets and make a nose.

"It is life-threatening surgery, there is no question of that," Mr Holmes said.

The team made their incisions as unobtrusive as

possible, to allow the surgeons to work on the area "behind her face".

They then peeled back the skin of Eman's face to reach her eye sockets. Her eyes were then lifted out.

This was one of the most delicate moments in the operation.

The eyes are connected directly to the brain; the doctors had to be careful not to pull on the attaching cord. Had this connection been severed, Eman would have been blinded, Mr Holmes said.

The surgeons also removed the bone between the eyes.

Probing deeper, they found additional holes in her skull.

Because her forehead was misshapen they fitted in a new template that included a new forehead, made with bone from her skull.

She was born with half her nose missing and a hole in her brain.

A piece of skull was also grafted to support her nose, and her eye sockets were moved closer together.

The surgeons removed the lumpy tissue of the tumour and used excess tissue to repair her nose and create new airways. The skin of Eman's face was then stitched back into place, Mr Holmes said.

She will need another operation to refine her nose when she is about 15, he said.

The plastic and maxillofacial unit Mr Holmes heads is one of the world's largest. It receives frequent overseas referrals.

The medical airlift — the first involving Palestinian children — was jointly organised by the Melbourne-based Beit Jala Palestinian Association, and Moira Kelly's Children First Foundation. The doctors donated their services.

Mr Holmes observes that Eman has gone from being "very introverted but sweet" before the operation to "generally much more confident and happy".

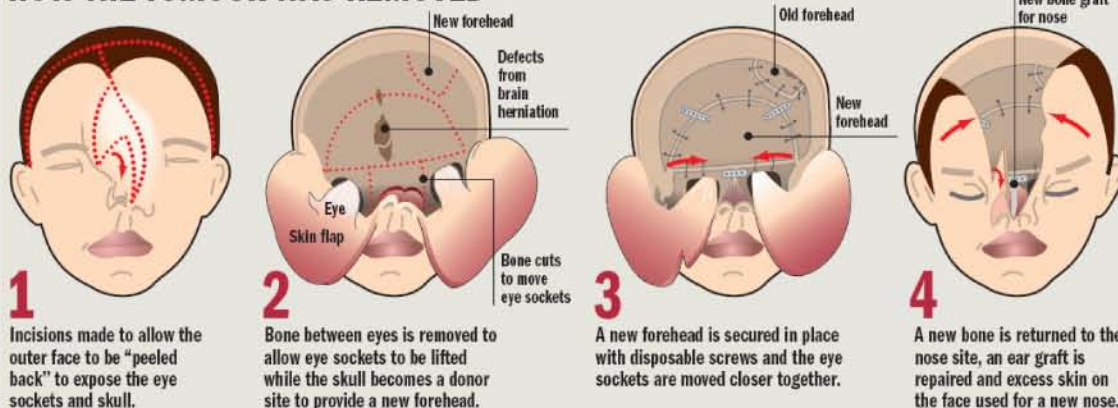
She has also begun to smile, he said.



ABOVE: Eman Tabaza beams with delight as she plays at an East Bentleigh children's party shop. BELOW RIGHT: Before the operation. BOTTOM: The new face.

PICTURES: NICOLE EMANUEL

HOW THE TUMOUR WAS REMOVED



SOURCE: MR ANTHONY HOLMES. GRAPHIC: J. BROWN/THE AGE 5/11/2004

