

She can talk and eat now

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FIONA GOODALL/Fairfax Media

A DIFFERENT GIRL: Nine-year-old Toelaura Sauni flew back to Samoa this week a changed person after surgery at Ormiston Hospital. She is pictured with mum Saua.

Toelaura Sauni couldn't open her mouth more than 3 millimetres when she came to New Zealand.

But new technology at Ormiston Hospital has changed that.

The nine-year-old hasn't been able to eat normally since she was about four.

A suspected fall as a toddler left her without a ball joint at the top of her jaw on one side.

Oral and maxillofacial surgeon Chris Sealey says damaged bone fused the jaw shut.

"This meant that Toelaura couldn't talk and had to eat liquids or soft food," he says. "Toelaura was embarrassed that she couldn't eat normally."

Toelaura and her mother Saua were flown from Samoa to undergo the seven-hour operation in October. They returned home this week a happy pair.

Toelaura could only open her mouth slightly so the anaesthetic and a breathing tube had to be put through her nose.

Surgeons used a CT scanner and a technique called stealth navigation to drill into the bone at the top of the youngster's jaw, watching their progress on a computer screen.

"Toelaura's condition is a very rare one and it is a potentially risky operation," Dr Sealey says.

They could have hit one of three major nerves beyond the bone leading to paralysis if they'd drilled too far.

Surgeons replaced the bone with fat from her stomach.

Dr Sealey says he can count on one hand the number of cases he has seen similar to Toelaura's.

"But she was such a brave girl," he says. "She came out of the operation a completely different person."

Mum Saua says Toelaura is making up for lost time after a six-week rehabilitation.

"Before the operation she didn't talk or eat," she says. "Now she talks too much and eats too much!"

But it's not quite the end yet. Dr Sealey says Toelaura will have to return to New Zealand once she has stopped growing for insertion of an artificial joint.

"Obviously we couldn't do that now as it would become obsolete as she grew."

Toelaura's operation is one of about 16 each year paid for by the Pacific Planning and Funding Team.

The team is based at the Counties Manukau Health Board and provides support for patients in Pacific islands who are unable to get the medical attention they require in their own country.

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