

Changing lives together since 1983



Spencer with his uncle, his primary caregiver, after his successful surgery.

Spencer's story

When Spencer was just 2 years old, his family experienced a terrible house fire in the middle of the night.

Spencer was rescued from his home by bystanders but, tragically, his grandmother and baby sister passed away. Spencer's left arm and both feet were badly burnt in the fire and, over the years, the burns formed thick, contracted scars on Spencer's body.

Children with severe burns require complex care to prevent their scars from tightening and forming contractures as they grow. Without medical attention, these scar contractures can be very debilitating, and will restrict the movement of the affected body part by thickening, and tightening and pulling the surrounding skin together. Across the Asia Pacific region, children with burns scar contractures cannot play properly, and struggle to participate fully in the daily life of their family and community. Simple movements, such as walking, running or carrying things, can be painful; and for some, impossible.

With both visual disfigurement and physical disabilities caused by the contractures, burns survivors can face bullying and ostracization from other children and members of their community. And the duty of care which falls on one or more parents or relatives can have a profound impact on the rest of the patient's family.

On their recent trip to Vaiola Hospital, in Tonga's capital city of Nuku'alofa, Interplast volunteer surgeons Dr Graham Sellars and Dr David Morgan, alongside local general surgeon Dr Alamea Aholelei, were able to operate on Spencer. They released the contractures to his left arm and right foot using a skin graft from his inner thigh.

The successful surgery will have a major impact on Spencer's immediate future and that of his family. Interplast's Dr David Morgan explained to Spencer's family, that because of the surgery Spencer will now be able "to play, catch, and go to school and do all those sorts of normal things".

Importantly, the Interplast team will continue to support Dr Aholelei to continue to develop her clinical skills in plastic and reconstructive surgery, so that she can undertake some of the local burns cases herself.

"I'm always excited to assist in these kinds of cases to learn new techniques and help make a difference in people's lives. Interplast being able to help Spencer have more function to his hand and leg is a light at the end of the tunnel for this child," Dr Aholelei said.

Since 1983, when Rotarians co-founded Interplast, Rotarians and Rotary Clubs have raised significant funds to support Interplast in repairing bodies and rebuilding lives. Over forty years of critical support for life-changing surgeries in Asia Pacific countries have seen incredible results for children like Spencer, and their families.

Rotary Clubs of the Peninsula Cluster in District 9820 were instrumental in the funding of this visit to Tonga. A sincere thank you to all the Rotarians and Clubs who made this program possible.