

Operations help Fiji kids face the future

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Photo: AMELIA JACOBSEN

FRIENDLY FACE: Plastic surgeon Dr Murray Beagley is heading a medical team that will travel to Fiji and carry out operations for those who couldn't otherwise access treatment. He will also take a collection of soft toys to give to children there.

Children in Fiji with deformities may soon have a new lease on life, after a visit by a New Zealand team of specialist surgeons.

Headed by Remuera plastic surgeon Dr Murray Beagley, the group will travel to Lautoka Hospital this Sunday, for a week to perform medical procedures that locals would not normally have access to.

The six-person team – two plastic surgeons, two anaesthetists and two nurses – will work on cleft pallets, facial tumours, grafts, burn scars and malformations.

Mr Beagley says the group sees a different side to Fiji, where children in need of treatment are not far from where tourists spend time at resorts.

"It isn't a holiday when we are there."

He says they can't treat everyone because they might not have the expertise some operations require.

The group hopes to conduct about four to five operations a day per surgeon, with up to 50 procedures in total by the end of the time.

"We need to use the time efficiently," he says.

"Surgery there is no more difficult. I take my own instruments and the nurses there are very helpful."

He says some deformities can mean people are shunned by society and so the surgery will help to socially integrate them.

"It's very satisfying."

The busy surgeon admits one of the hardest parts of the trip is finding the time to go.

He says the Fijian medical system has strained resources so "items taken for granted here are reused there".

But he adds that the benefit of working in a remote environment is the unlimited access to operating theatres.

The trip has been funded by the Auckland East Rotary Club and this is the fourth trip of its kind Mr Beagley has been involved with.

Club president Colin Mathieson says he is pleased that the well-organised trip is heading off soon.

"What these guys do is amazing. The fact that they give so much time is incredible."

Fundraising co-ordinator Sheryl Willetts says \$40,000 has been gathered for the trip.

It is linked to the Interplast programme, which provides free reconstructive surgery for the poor in developing countries.

Interplast was established in 1983 and Mr Beagley says the Australasian initiative operates about 30 programmes a year in up to 25 countries providing about 1500 operations.

He is a consultant plastic surgeon at Middlemore Hospital and directs the Congenital Hand Service at Starship.