

Surgeons remove 6-pound tumor from girl's jaw at Cohen Children's

Updated March 9, 2017

By Jonathan Schiffman

When Janet Silva arrived at the Cohen Children's Medical Center in November, she covered her face with a scarf and would not look doctors in the eye. The 12-year-old girl from Gambia was afraid to show the six-pound tumor in her jaw that hampered her ability to breathe, speak and eat.

Now Janet is preparing to return home, free of her tumor and able to speak and eat normally, thanks to a group of doctors at the hospital.

Dr. David Hoffman, director of the oral and maxillofacial surgery division at Staten Island University Hospital, and a team of four other surgeons performed a 10-hour surgery at Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park to remove the tumor on Jan. 16.

"For a tumor to grow to this size is extremely unique," Hoffman said. "You never see this kind of thing."

Hoffman had received a picture of Janet last August, and knew the tumor would have to be removed as soon as possible, or Janet could starve to death because the tumor's size would make eating impossible.

He assembled a team of surgeons and reached out to the Global Medical Relief Fund, a Staten Island based charity that arranged for transportation, housing and travel visas for Janet and her mother Phillomena Silva. The surgeons performed the operation pro-bono.

The tumor first popped up when Janet was 5 years old. It was so small that her mother mistook it for a toothache. But 3 years ago, she watched as her daughter's tumor grew so large that it pushed back her tongue and prevented tooth growth. Treatment was not available in Gambia.

The size of the tumor made the surgery difficult. The room for error was large, and the doctors wanted to make sure Janet would not suffer too much blood loss. The surgeons carefully planned each step using a computer simulation.

Dr. Armen Kasabian, the system chief of plastic surgery at North Shore University Hospital, was in charge of reconstructing a portion of Janet's face. He said her legs were just long enough to use some of their skin and bone tissue for the reconstruction.

"I've been part of some big tumor surgeries, but not one this large," Kasabian said. "A good result is all I need."

About 30 nurses, doctors and resident physicians each performed a different task throughout the successful surgery, which took place on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, normally a day off for many in the group.

Just a week later, they all noticed a sizable difference in Janet's behavior.

"It's like a fairy tale," Hoffman said. "She was lost to the world, and the surgery turned a light on for her. The highlight came when she started talking. This is why you become a doctor."

Janet has thrown out the scarf that she used to cover her face. She has learned to speak basic English, and is looking forward to going back to school in Gambia.

The experience also helped her realize a new dream.