

Feature

A dream comes true

Leila Srour

Tao Yeo dreamed of a wife and family but due to his facial appearance, he could not imagine any woman would agree to marry him.

Yeo suffered for many years from an often unrecognised disease called noma. His life almost ended at the age of nine when noma, an infection of the face, destroyed part of his mouth, cheek and one eye.

The hole in his face gradually contracted, forcing his teeth through his cheek. He was unable to open and close his mouth, making eating and speaking very difficult. Yeo's grandmother fed Yeo through the hole in his face.

Noma affects children living in remote areas, in extreme poverty, with malnutrition and without access to medical care or immunisation. Without treatment, children with noma often die, with an estimated mortality of 90 percent.

The few survivors suffer from severe disfigurement and difficulty eating and

speaking. Most health care workers do not know about noma, treatment, prevention or surgical treatment of noma survivors.

Every year, at Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane, Lao surgeons and Bridge the Gap, a Dutch surgical team, support the treatment of facial deformities, including noma. The Women's International Group (WIG) provides nutritional and financial support for the patients.

Tao Yeo lives in a remote part of Oudomxay province. He travelled to Vientiane three times to ask for help to improve his appearance. The doctors worried that the surgery would be too difficult and dangerous. In January 2017, the doctors and Tao Yeo agreed to surgery.

The first challenge was anesthesia, as Yeo could not open his mouth for the breathing tube, which had to be inserted through his nose while awake. The surgeons spent over 12 hours working to release his jaw and move muscle and skin to fill the gap in his face.

After surgery, Yeo suffered from pain, difficulty drinking and eating and from a serious infection that



Mr Tao Yeo (right), his wife and daughter share a visit with Dr Leila.

--Photo Aleksandra Prochowska

destroyed the flap of skin and muscle.

He stayed in the hospital for six months. Doctors, nurses and volunteers supported him. WIG volunteers helped him to visit the eye hospital for an artificial eye. At last he was able to go home - a new

person.

Before surgery, Yeo rarely left his village due to extreme shyness and stigma about his appearance. After surgery, in 2018, Tao Yeo visited a village far from his home. Yeo met a lovely woman, who agreed to marry him.

In September 2018,

Yeo drove his wife by motorbike at night to the district hospital where their daughter was born. Last month, they built a house together. Tao Yeo is very thankful to everyone who made his dream come true.

The author of this article

has a dream that risk factors for noma - extreme poverty and childhood malnutrition - will decrease and that access to immunisation and health care will improve, so the disease, noma, will be eliminated in Laos and throughout the world.