

US surgeons remove 6-pound tumor from Gambian girl's mouth

March 9 2017, by Frank Eltman



Janet Sylva, left, and her mother, Philomena, smile during a press conference at Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park, N.Y., on Thursday, March 9, 2017. Surgeons removed a 6-pound tumor that had been growing in the 12-year-old girl's mouth during a procedure at the medical center in January. The girl and her mother, who are from the West African nation of Gambia, were brought to the United States for the free surgery by the charity The Global Medical Relief Fund. Surgeons said the tumor was one of the largest they had ever seen and had prevented the girl from eating and made breathing difficult. (AP Photo/Frank Eltman).

Twelve-year-old Janet Sylva of Gambia wants to be a doctor when she grows up, she says with a broad grin—one that surgeons in New York gave back to her after removing from her mouth one of the largest tumors they'd ever seen.

The 6-pound benign tumor was about the size of a cantaloupe. It prevented Janet from eating, and her breathing had become so difficult that doctors were afraid she might die within a year if nothing was done.

"It made her a prisoner in her own body," said Dr. David Hoffman, a Staten Island surgeon who became aware of Janet's plight last year after doctors in the neighboring west African nation of Senegal reached out to international health groups for assistance. She had stopped going to school and wore a scarf around her face to hide the massive tumor.

Hoffman coordinated with the Global Medical Relief Fund and a team of volunteer surgeons and other medical staff at Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park on Long Island to arrange for Janet to have the surgery, which was performed for free in January.

Dr. Armen Kasabian, chief of plastic surgery at North Shore University Hospital, led the team in performing the delicate operation, which not only involved removing the tumor but also rebuilding her jaw by using part of a bone from her leg. Kasabian said the team knew they had to get it right the first time because Janet and her mother, Philomena, would only be in the U.S. for a short time.

"We don't have the luxury of operating on her 10 times," he said. "We have to try and get the most that we can out of just one operation."

He and Hoffman said they employed 3-D imaging to build models of the child's mouth, including the tumor, and were able to use the virtual modeling techniques to practice for the procedure before the actual 12 ½

-hour surgery took place on Jan. 16.

Both physicians said the tumor wouldn't have grown so large if Janet had lived in the U.S.

"It would never get to this," Kasabian said. "This grew over the course of three years, and she had no one to take care of it there. Here, it would have been treated when it was smaller and more manageable."

Janet and her mother are preparing to return to Gambia next week, said Elissa Montanti of the Global Medical Relief Fund, the Staten-Island based charity that arranged for transportation, housing and travel visas for Janet and her mother.

Before heading home, the pair returned Thursday to Cohen Children's hospital.

Through an interpreter speaking their native language of Wolof, the mother and daughter shyly thanked the medical staff.

"I'm very happy and grateful because I have my daughter back," Philomena Sylva said.

Janet smiled and said the scarf she had worn to hide her face has been thrown away.

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