



HEALTH



Chin's condition before the surgery (left) and after (right).

Walking tall

Lower limb reconstruction surgery offers those with bone deformities a chance to lead active lives. **KASMIAH MUSTAPHA** writes.



Davidran before (left) and after his surgery (right).

FOR the first 10 years of his life, S. Davidran was walking with his left foot curled inward. Bory with a club foot — both his feet were curled inward — Davidran had one major surgery when he was about a week old. The surgery to straighten his right foot was done at a government hospital. At the time, the doctors told his father, S. Sivakumar, that they could only perform one operation at a time because Davidran was too young. The second surgery would be done later.

However, after seeing what his son had to go through in a major surgery at such a young age, Sivakumar decided Davidran would not go for the second procedure. "The first one was so complicated, they had to cut through his veins and put in screws, metal and cement to make sure that the foot became straight. I was worried that it would worsen his condition that he could be paralysed."

Despite the difficulty in walking, Davidran, 11, is a healthy and active boy. He loves playing football and joins in other activities at school. The only drawback is that he has to change shoes every two weeks.

"I have to keep buying school shoes for him because he uses shoes with canvas soles. They keep getting torn," said Sivakumar.

Then a charity organisation, Tzu Chi Foundation, came to his school and saw Davidran. Foundation members urged Sivakumar to send him for surgery and said they were willing to bear the costs. Sivakumar finally relented and

met with the doctor. In March, Davidran underwent surgery to correct his left foot at Mahkota Medical Centre, Malacca. He is now able to wear his shoes for longer than two weeks.

Chin Lee Chow, 40, had limb reconstruction surgery done to correct her bow leg deformity. It was a long and complicated process. She had to go through six operations between 2007 and 2009 before her condition was finally corrected. She opted for corrective surgery after her condition worsened and she could no longer walk.

As she grew older, her legs could no longer support her weight and she suffered a fall in 2006. She was then referred to the medical centre for treatment by her doctor.

"Sometimes, I would get severe pain in my back, making it very hard for me to walk or stand up for a long time," she recalled.

Although Chin did not get her wish to be slightly taller, she is grateful that she can



Davidran's left foot before the surgery (left) and after (right).



walk normally now. Mahkota Medical Centre consultant orthopaedic surgeon Dr Thirukumar Subramaniam said through lower limb reconstructive surgery, people with a

Limb reconstruction works for people born with a deformity or who have suffered accidents.

— Dr Thirukumar



deformity or who suffer from bone-related abnormalities after an accident are able to get their legs to a reasonable condition.

"Many of us think that when someone is born with a deformity, it cannot be corrected. They should know that our bones can still grow, even after they are broken or damaged. With surgery, we can restore them to a reasonable state. We always say 'What we cannot repair, we will reconstruct'."

Dr Thirukumar said about 80 per cent of bone deformity cases are due to accidents and 20 per cent are categorised as birth defects.

"Most suffer from deformation after an accident. Usually, one leg is shorter than the other or the bones do not straighten properly after surgery. This will result in a limp."

"When accident victims are

wheeled in, the priority is on saving their lives. Some of the reconstructive work cannot be done during the emergency treatment and as a result, the victim suffers from residual effects such as shorter bones in their legs."

He said for these cases, the surgery would involve cutting parts of the bones and letting them grow back. Metal parts will be inserted into the bones with screws that must be rotated periodically to stretch the bones so that they grow back.

"If we want the bone to grow by three centimetres, we have to pull it for 30 days. For older patients, it would take about 90 days for the bone to grow and harden."

"However, this procedure can only work if the leg is shorter by 1.5cm. If it is more than 3cm, it cannot be done. If it can be done, I would inform patients about the advantages and disadvantages because the decision is still theirs to make."

Having performed more than 30 surgeries, Dr Thirukumar said each case is unique. It is not an easy procedure, but he considers it a challenge to help the patient as best he can.

"Limb reconstruction surgery is almost an obscure specialty today. One reason for this is that it entails a long learning curve. Treatment is also over a prolonged period of time."

"With the high cost of the treatment, ranging between RM15,000 and RM200,000, some patients will decide not to proceed. If they can live with their condition and it does not affect their health and lifestyle, I would not push them to have it."

■ kasmiah@nstp.com.my