



Changing the face of poverty

By **Markus Mannheim**

ON a regular working day, Robert Drielsma smooths over the real and imagined flaws of middle-class Canberra; re-sculpting noses and breasts, syphoning unwanted fat.

But this month the sought-after plastic surgeon left his usual schedule behind to bring hope to the lives of scores of Solomon Islanders, the accidental victims of congenital deformities.

Dr Drielsma, who runs Canberra Cosmetic Surgery in Deakin, spent a week in the troubled Pacific state with a small volunteer medical team to operate on about 40 children with cleft lips and palates.

The team, which was funded by the Australian Government's overseas aid program, also treated dozens of other patients scarred by burns and injuries.

Marion Wright, the managing director of Interplast Australia, the surgical aid agency behind the trip, said that each year volunteer plastic surgeons give thousands of people in poverty-stricken countries a "second chance" in life.

"Quite often these people are hidden and ostracised because of how they look," she said. "These operations allow them back into their community."

A cleft lip or palate can occur during the first few months of a foetus's development, causing the

mouth to join incorrectly.

The problem affects about one in every 750 Australians and as many one in every 300 babies in some developing countries. Its cause is currently unknown.

If the defect is not corrected by surgery, it can prevent a child from feeding properly and developing speech. Dr Drielsma, who also operates on children with cleft palates in Canberra and Sydney, said the flaw can sometimes be fatal in poorer nations.

"In some countries, these children are simply abandoned," he said. Since 1983, Australian Interplast surgeons have conducted almost 15,000 operations and trained hundreds of medical staff in developing countries.

Ms Wright recalls a group of Fijian girls who recently had surgery to correct their cleft lips.

"We asked them to come back in 12 months to have their palates repaired, but they didn't turn up," she said.

"When we found them, they said they didn't need it any more because they had already married. The [surgery] had put them back in the marriage market and, in some places, that means survival."

■ You can donate to Interplast Australia by calling (03) 9249 1231 or visiting www.interplast.com.au.



ABOVE: A Solomon Island mum with her child who is recovering well from an operation to correct a cleft lip.



RIGHT: Surgeon Robert Drielsma.



Robert Drielsma and Gold Coast surgeon Craig Layt operating in the Solomon Islands. Australian Interplast surgeons have conducted almost 15,000 operations in developing countries.