

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I was born with a cleft of the hard and soft palate in 1986 at Mercy Maternity Hospital in East Melbourne. When I was 7 months old I had a major operation to repair my palate and later when I was 11 years old I had another big operation called a pharyngoplasty – which is a kind of plastic surgery for the pharynx (soft tissue at the back of the mouth) when the tissue at the back of the mouth is not able to close properly. It was to help correct my continual speech problems. It took a couple of months to fully recover. Following this operation I began weekly private speech therapy which was to help me at school. Mum decided that private lessons, although very expensive, were the best way to go as the Special Needs program at my primary school would firstly take too long with “red tape” and also it probably wouldn’t be on a regular basis.

I am now 21 years and still deciding about a pathway to follow in life. I may try Teaching, but I’m still undecided. I keep myself fit by playing Basketball and Football. I still live at home with my mum [REDACTED] and dad [REDACTED]. I also have a sister [REDACTED] and she’s lucky because she’s never had to have major operations or to deal with speech problems in her life.

This was tough for me though as I thought I was the only one with a cleft and people would struggle to understand me. This was really hard when I started school because a lot of the kids didn’t know what a cleft was. Joining Cleftstars was the best experience for me. It is a social group which allows children, teenagers and young adults who are born with clefts to get together and discuss our problems we are having, as well as, listening to doctors and other experts speak. As one of the oldest in the group I am something of an older brother to some of the younger members and I feel they appreciate the fact that I know what they are going through – because just like them my speech is different. Even though I had further corrective surgery I was still sometimes teased at high school and made to feel self-conscious because of my speech and the appearance of my teeth. I still have problems with my teeth.

As part of Cleftstars I was given the opportunity to go to a leadership conference in Beijing that was run by Operation Smile. This wonderful experience really brought home an awareness of how craniofacial anomalies affect the lives of thousands of children in our world.

On my return I presented a talk with Alyssa Bernard about our time in China to the National CleftPALS Conference at the Children’s Hospital.

I feel it is necessary to provide funding with speech pathology for children with clefts because it would acknowledge that this is a problem for many Aussie kids and it would help with speech problems we have had to face growing up. It would ease the stress that cleft children face when dealing with unfamiliar people and difficult situations or procedures. Unlike the children I saw in China we are not a Third World country and we do have the capacity in Australia to provide help for cleft children and their families.

Thank you for reading my letter of submission.

Regards