

MISSION: COMPASSION



have a

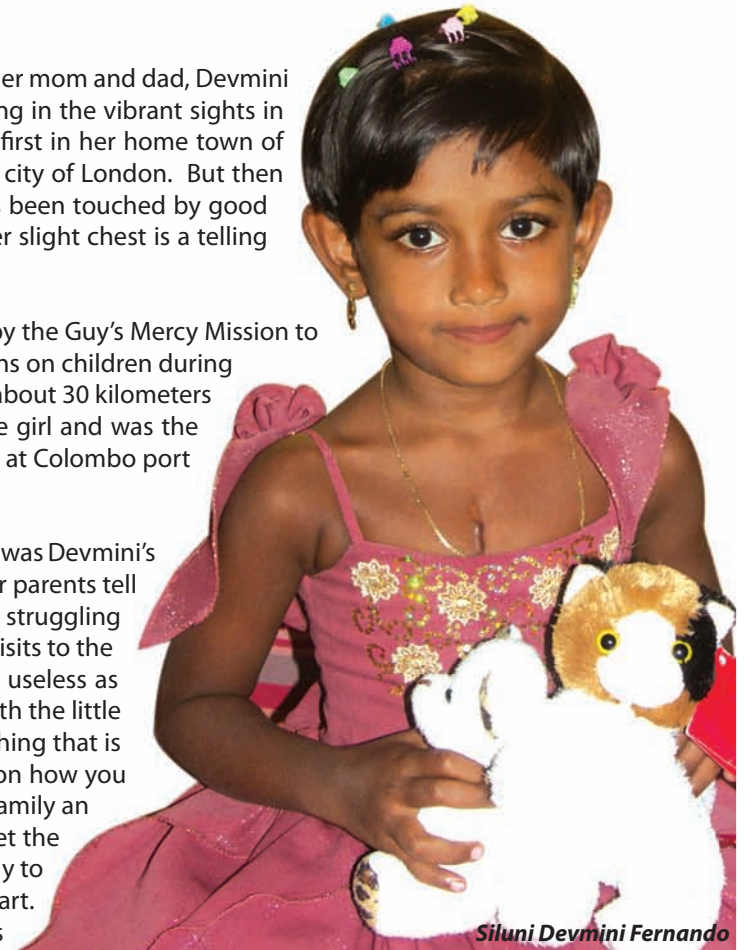
Guy's (Paediatric Cardiac)
Surgery Mercy Mission to Sri Lanka
Helping children with heart disease

How a UK-based Sri Lankan and a team of dedicated British medical professionals are giving Sri Lankan children a new lease of life

As I enter the London hotel room where she is staying with her mom and dad, Devmini Siluni Fernando is fast asleep, exhausted perhaps, after taking in the vibrant sights in and around London. She's a fortunate little 3-year-old, the first in her home town of Ragama to get to travel in a big jet plane and see the great city of London. But then again, Devmini isn't your ordinary little Sri Lankan girl; she's been touched by good fortune in more ways than one. The scar in the centre of her slight chest is a telling sign of just how fortunate she is.

Devmini was a lucky recipient of a magical heart operation by the Guy's Mercy Mission to Sri Lanka, a charity organization that conducts free operations on children during an annual pilgrimage of sorts to Sri Lanka. Born in Ragama, about 30 kilometers Northeast of Colombo, Devmini was just like any other little girl and was the centre of the world for her parents, father Upul, a winchman at Colombo port and Samanthika; a stay-at-home mom.

The first sign of the problem that was to traumatize the family was Devmini's incessant crying. Every baby cries, but this was non-stop, her parents tell me. Day and night it went on and on. She also seemed to be struggling when doing something as natural as breathing. Numerous visits to the General Practitioner as well as the Ragama hospital proved useless as doctors insisted that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the little one. Perhaps the most galling thing – or this may be something that is understandable to a certain extent in Sri Lanka depending on how you look at it – was the fact that doctors refused to provide the family an Echo examination. After endless months and attempts to get the doctors to agree to an Echo, the family finally succeeded, only to find out that 11 month old Devmini had a tiny hole in the heart. The condition is one that most babies are born with but it is



Siluni Devmini Fernando

also one which naturally heals itself; not for Devmini. The parents tell me that they were absolutely devastated and had no idea what to do. The doctors too insisted that the hole would close up naturally.

Fate however, had other ideas. At a healing session at their local church, the devoutly Catholic parents heard that a group of doctors from the UK were due to arrive in Sri Lanka to conduct free heart operations and the church had been asked to submit the name of a family that required an emergency operation for a loved one. By the time Samantha got around to telling the church head about Devmini, the one name had already been chosen, that of a man in his 30's who required urgent surgery on a heart ailment.

Crestfallen, the family were back to square one. A few days later a messenger from the church arrived at the Fernando household to inform them that the doctors only perform operations on children and that the earlier man's name had been picked wrongly. A mad dash from Ragama to the General Hospital in Colombo ensued with Samantha riding in the back of her brother in law's motorcycle with tiny Devmini in a helmet.

'At the hospital the doctors examined her and then began discussing something between themselves,' Samantha tells me; 'I could see the grave looks on their faces and feared the worst. Then one of the local doctors came up and told me that operation or not, my little girl had just 45 days to live.'

The chief surgeon on the team of doctors, Mr. Conal Austin FRCS, insisted that the operation was too difficult and the chances of survival for the little girl were staggeringly slim. In the end however he agreed to go ahead with the surgery, taking 5 hours to close the tiny hole in Devmini's heart. Years later Devmini is in London and her visit here included a trip to No 10 Downing Street where he met one of the most powerful men in the world.

Devmini's operation, in April 2002, was the first carried out by the Mercy Mission in Sri Lanka. Established by Surrey based Sri Lankan businessman Jai Lameer and his wife Jayanthi, the Mercy Mission makes an annual pilgrimage of sorts to Sri Lanka to conduct complicated heart operations on children. The team usually consists of

up to 11 or 12 medical personnel led by chief surgeon Mr. Conal Austin and Dr. John Simpson and includes intensivists, nurses, perfusionists and heart and lung medics. Over the past 4 years, the mission has carried out 39 operations and has saved the lives of 33 Sri Lankan youngsters.

Little Devmini was in London as Mr. Conal Austin was honoured at the Children's Champions Awards, organized by children's charity Barnardo's and News of the World. News of the World in fact has already pledged to sponsor the Mercy Mission's next trip to Sri Lanka and no less than Sir Philip Green, Chairman of the Arcadia retail group has also given his support for the Mercy Mission's cause.

Siluni and her parents Sunil and Samantha with Dr. John Simpson following her surgery



Mr. Conal Austin, the surgeon on the mission, and (right) performing an operation in Colombo

Mr. Austin and Dr. Simpson with some of their little patients and families



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The story of the Mission is one of fate and coincidence. Jai Lameer has a certain nonchalance about him that is characteristic of a man who's survived a quadruple heart bypass and lived to tell the tale. On that occasion it was Mr. Conal Austin who had performed the complex operation and there, the friendship and the Mercy Mission had begun. Mr. Austin himself had visited Sri Lanka many years before with his significant other and had fallen in love with the Island. Since his operation Mr. Lameer has devoted his time and resources to organizing the annual Mercy Mission, including coordinating visas, accommodation, choosing the patients and of course raising funds. Having been given a new lease of life, Mr. Lameer is now helping to give Sri Lanka's youngsters a second chance.

Right: Mr. Jai Lameer, the architect of the Mercy Mission and (Below) the entire Mercy Mission team with a reporter from the News of the World.



For more information on the Mercy Mission and how you can help, visit www.mercymission.co.uk.