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SEEING THINGS IN A NEW LIGHT

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— Adelyn Koh (right)



Prof Ang giving Adelyn (above) an eye check-up yesterday. She had the paediatric Boston keratoprosthesis surgery last November, a week after Vietnamese toddler Hoang Binh Minh (above left) had the procedure here. ST PHOTOS: JOYCE FANG

” She can see mum's face, thanks to op

11-year-old has 20% of sight restored after artificial cornea transplant

By MELISSA PANG

FIVE months ago, all she could see were moving shadows and flashes of bright colours.

Today, the 11-year-old girl who cut an album to raise funds for her eye operation can tell where her mother's eyes, nose and mouth are, thanks to an artificial cornea transplant operation.

Adelyn Koh was born with cloudy corneas. She has cataracts and had less than 1 per cent to 2 per cent of her vision. But the Primary 6 pupil has had around 20

per cent of her sight restored after undergoing the paediatric Boston keratoprosthesis surgery on her right eye last November.

The complex operation gives children born with cornea blindness a better shot at restoring long-term vision than conventional cornea transplants with a high failure rate in children.

“Every time I see something that I never could, I get very excited,” said Adelyn, the eldest of three girls. “I felt very curious and excited when I first saw my mum's face. Close up, it looked different.”

Adelyn made the news last September for raising funds for surgery to restore her sight. Her mother Mary Lim, 39, had the idea of selling CDs with piano tunes composed by the girl.

The 2½-hour procedure involved transplanting an artificial cornea — a button-shaped device made of a plastic-like biocompatible material — onto her eye. The interior structures of the eye, like the iris, were also reconstructed.

Adelyn is the first Singaporean child to have Boston keratoprosthesis transplanted. Her operation came a week after Viet-

namese toddler Hoang Binh Minh had the procedure here.

The artificial cornea has been used in adults with good results, said Associate Professor Leonard Ang of Lang Eye Centre. But it is more complicated for children as their eyes are smaller.

Before the paediatric Boston keratoprosthesis, which costs about \$30,000 per eye, the only available option for children born with cornea blindness was conventional transplants. But more than 80 per cent of paediatric cornea transplants fail within three years due to children's high immunological response to the graft. With each transplant, the risk of failure increases, he said.

That was the case with Adelyn, who underwent four cornea transplants — all of which failed — before her first birthday.

“The operation... aims to give Adelyn greater independence with her daily activities, a better quality of life and to enable her to see things that she could never see before,” said Prof Ang, who is hopeful that her vision will be restored to 30 per cent, the level needed for reading.

Even though Adelyn plans to have the operation for her left eye, she has to deal with the possibility of increased eye pressure, which can lead to glaucoma.

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