NZ's heart-breaker:rheumatic fever rates on the rise

Insight - Every year, up to 200 New Zealanders die from heart damage caused by rheumatic fever - an illness wiped out in many other wealthy countries. And despite a five-year campaign to tackle the disease here, rates are once again on the rise. Philippa Tolley reports.



The wall of memories of Tofi Toelupe

Tofi Toelupe beams down from a huge portrait above the fireplace in the front room of Molly Lepa Ogosi's Mount Roskill home. Smaller photos of Tofi, by himself and with his family, surround the portrait and a string of shells is hung in a heart shape. This is how Molly, her

parents and sisters pay tribute to the baby of their family, who died of rheumatic heart failure 18 months ago. He was 15.

Molly, the eldest sister in a family of four sits on a couch in front of a large tapa cloth that dominates the wall behind her - a gift given at her brother's funeral. No one was thinking of rheumatic fever when her brother complained of a sore stomach and feeling sick. Tofi was a gentle giant with the biggest cheeky smile, she says; a "good boy" who loved playing with his nieces and nephews.

"He's a big boy, like, six-foot something, and he was huge and he'd eat for six people... So then we noticed he wasn't eating much. Some mornings he [would] just have one piece of toast and then not long after spew it all up."
The family were worried. They desperately wanted him to go to the doctor, but Tofi was having none of it. Then he collapsed in the kitchen. An ambulance took him to hospital and after tests the doctors told the family it was rheumatic fever. The diagnosis left the family confused.

"He never complained of a sore throat. Most of the ads, they say if you have a sore throat, go straight to the doctor. But I was like, Mum, it's a stomach he's been complaining of."

Rheumatic fever is an auto-immune disease that is triggered by a Strep A infection, frequently a sore throat but not always. The illness can sometimes progress to the stage where the heart is damaged. Every year in New Zealand, 600 to 800 people are admitted to hospital with underlying rheumatic heart disease and 150 to 200 people die.

In Tofi’s case, by the time the disease was diagnosed, muscles around his heart had died and a valve was damaged. "They told us that if we had bought Tofi in earlier it wouldn't end up like that, “ Molly says.

The news was devastating to the family and the surgery to repair the valve was touch and go. But Tofi pulled through and was trying to lose weight to get ready for a heart transplant.

It was not to be. Tofi collapsed at school and, although paramedics managed to revive him, the teenager died on the way to the hospital.