



Edited by FAY BURSTIN



Girl babies, on average, start talking a month or two earlier than boys

Healthwatch

Gap closes on defect

WHEN Danielle O'Connor discovered she was pregnant four years ago, she had a dream it would be twins.

The dream turned out to be prophetic — but an unsuspecting nightmare also lay in store.

The same day she was told of her babies' genders, she found out one of her daughters would be born with a birth defect.

A staggering one in about 700 babies in Australia is born with the facial abnormality known as cleft lip or cleft palate.

Human faces form inside the womb between six and 12 weeks, growing from the sides to the centre, so the nose is formed last.

For cleft-affected babies, the process is incomplete: either the roof of the mouth known as the palate fails to fuse together or the infant is left with a gap between the lips and nostrils.

Despite the high incidence of cleft lips and palates, Mrs O'Connor and her

Emma O'Sullivan

husband, Martin, were not alone in knowing little of the condition until it was detected in baby Eve.

The splits in Eve's lip and the hard part of the roof of her mouth were discovered during an ultrasound 16 weeks into the pregnancy.

"We were just devastated," Mrs O'Connor said.

And the condition was

dition can be fixed with plastic surgery.

But well before the surgeon's magic knife comes to the cosmetic rescue, babies born with clefts face a more urgent problem — eating.

Infants with unfused palates often cannot be breastfed because the gap stops them from closing off air from their nose and they struggle to suck.

Seemingly never-ending rounds of surgery are

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very noticeable at birth, she recalled.

"It looked like an inverted V up to the nostrils, which is why it was referred to as 'hare lip' in the past," she said. "But we are eager to bring this condition out of the dark ages and dispel the old 'hare lip' tag."

While the cause remains unknown, experts believe genetics and some environmental factors could be responsible. Luckily, the con-

needed, initially to close the gaps and later throughout childhood to allow adult teeth to come through gums, fix jaw, dental and speech problems. Sometimes they need bone grafts, transferring hip bones to the jaw to support new teeth.

For the O'Connors, Eve's much-needed feeding equipment and support came from CleftPALS, the Cleft Palate and Lip Association of Australia.

While three-year-old Eve O'Connor's scars were barely noticeable, CleftPALS president Allison Richards said not all cleft babies were so lucky.

"Two children can have the same type of cleft and be operated on by the same surgeon, but their scar tissue can still heal differently," she said.

Eve is in good company — radio woman Wendy Hammer, AFL footballer Mick Martyn and Hollywood actor Joaquin Phoenix all shared a version of the same defect at birth and have gone on to achieve success.

After two operations before her first birthday — one at three months to close the gap between her lip and at nine months to fix her palate — the future looks bright for Eve who is keeping pace with her twin sister, Lila, in the race to grow up.

This Saturday is CleftPALS' first national awareness day at the Collingwood Children's Farm.

For more information, call 9584 4154.



Bright future: Eve (centre) with parents Danielle and Martin O'Connor and twin sister Lila. Picture: IAN CURRIE

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