

Boy starts tasting food

Tube-fed toddler making progress after treatment

LYSE COMINS

JASON Long, the three-year-old Salt Rock boy who has never learnt how to eat and has become dependent on tube feeding, has returned from a special hospital in Austria showing improvement in his condition.

He has returned a "changed" child who is happy to taste foods ranging from bacon and eggs to chips and cake, although he is yet to take the first big step to swallow his food.

Daily News readers were among local individuals and businesses that rallied to Jason's support after the newspaper published a front-page article highlighting his rare eating disorder called "tube dependency" in March.

An amount of R214 000 came pouring in to pay for his parents, Jill and Bruce Long, to take him to the University Hospital Clinic in Graz, which specialises in treating children with eating disorders.

"We are thrilled and very touched by everyone who has helped to make this dream possible. Our son is now putting food in his mouth – something we haven't seen in two years," Long said.

Jason, who was born nine weeks

tube-fed from six months. Jill believes his eating aversion was because of severe reflux that burnt his oesophagus.

This led him to reject his bottle and having to be tube-fed milk and solids every three hours during the day, and milk at night while sleeping. He is fed through a silicone mic-key attached to a hole with a removable plug in his stomach.

turn from Austria with Jason eating at least a small variety of foods such as custard and chocolate. However, while he is now putting a wide variety of food into his mouth to taste – something he previously refused to do – he is yet to learn how to swallow.

At the children's hospital, Jason was treated by a team of specialists including paediatricians, psycholo-



BABY STEPS: Jason Long, the Salt Rock boy who can't eat, has made huge progress since returning from the University Hospital Clinic in Graz, Austria, which specialises in treating children with eating disorders. Daily News readers and local businesses rallied to his support earlier this year to help raise the R200 000 that was needed for the journey and the hospital treatment.

gastroenterologists with the aim of weaning him off his tube feeding by starving him of the feeds. He attended play picnics where he was surrounded by food and encouraged to eat.

However, while the Longs witnessed many children in the hospital become tube free, on day two Jason got sick with rotavirus and norovirus, which caused vomiting and diarrhoea, hampering his

progress with the therapy. Jason later also contracted bronchitis. It was only halfway through his second week at the hospital that he could resume therapy.

"Our goal was to get rid of the feeding tube and owing to the circumstances, we were not able to. Our second goal was to find out why Jason gags, has diarrhoea and vomits and we wanted to see a gastroenterologist. We found out there was no surgical reason for it," Long said.

Their third goal was to find out whether there was anything else wrong with Jason, but he could not be assessed during the trip because he was so sick. However, Jill said the trip was "totally worth it" as he was showing an interest in food.

"He will sit with us at the table and taste food with us, feeding himself with his spoon. He will taste bacon, egg, mince, banana, biscuits, sweets, chips, sauces and cake," Long said.

He is also speaking more and has extended his vocabulary.

Jill said the trip to the hospital taught them how to handle Jason's problem. She said she was still in contact with the specialists at the hospital, who were assisting her to help Jason via online coaching. Long has created a blog for Jason, www.jasonsjourney.weebly.com.

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