

A delicate business

This new-school neurosurgeon knows it takes more than science to heal his patients, writes **Ali Barnard**.

The 14-year-old-girl perched on top of the doctor's examination table laughs and jokes with her father. The 10cm cut in front of her left ear is only noticeable when she turns her head. It is the only evidence of the surgery she had a week ago to remove a growth lodged in the left-hand side of her brain.

Her father, Tony Mansour, looks as though he has had a weight lifted from his shoulders. His "week of hell" is finally over and he cannot contain the gratitude he feels for the man who removed the tumour from Angela's brain.

That man is 36-year-old Dr Marc Coughlan. He is one of the leading neurosurgeons at the Prince of Wales Hospital and Sydney Children's Hospital in Randwick where he specialises in minimally invasive spinal surgery, brain tumours and paediatric neurosurgery.

"The operation was a success. But the build up to it was the most stressful time of my life," Mansour says. "Thank God for Dr Coughlan. He came in on his days off. Not a lot of doctors would do that."

There is something special about the way Coughlan talks to Angela. He gently announces it's time for her stitches to come out and in the next breath he has her laughing, teasing that she should

think about becoming a doctor rather than a lawyer. In a few quick movements the stitches are out and Angela appears not to have even noticed.

"I wasn't really that scared," says Angela about her operation. "I trusted Dr Coughlan because he seemed like a nice guy. He is a nice guy. I was just scared about waking up during the surgery. But thankfully that didn't happen."

It is almost five years since Coughlan arrived in Sydney from his home country of South Africa to spend a year learning all he could about minimally invasive

'I give my phone number to some patients, which I guess is a little unorthodox because it's not something that doctors usually do.'

surgery with Australian neurosurgeon Dr Charles Teo. It took a year for Coughlan to decide that he wanted to stay in Australia to continue practicing.

As a paediatric surgeon Coughlan faces the daunting task of operating on children and babies, some only a few months old, with life-threatening brain tumours. And while he considers his job to be rewarding, Coughlan admits

that working with children can be an incredibly delicate business.

"Babies of a few months old can be tricky as their brains are not fully formed," he says. "It's a lot more delicate because they are so much smaller and you can't afford to lose much blood in surgery. Operating on older children is easier as the brain is more developed than that of a baby."

One would assume operating on the brain of a small child would be the most challenging aspect of his job. But Coughlan says it is harder to balance personalised care for patients and being mentally prepared for surgery.

"I usually get to meet my patients before I operate on them," he says. "I like to get to know them better and develop a rapport with them. However, having said that, you also have to divorce yourself from the situation to ensure you do the job technically. You have to see it as a job you have to do. You just have to say to yourself – what is the best possible outcome for this patient?"

It is this mentality that sometimes pushes Coughlan to go much further than your average doctor. Such is the compassion he has for his patients he will often give his personal mobile number to them after surgery.