

Operation Smile to perform corrective surgeries in DRC

Operation Smile is currently on its Mega Mission which aims to perform 250 corrective surgeries in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in one week.



The mission takes place from 3-12 July in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, where two teams totalling 84 people will give these children back their ability to smile, eat and live a normal life.

Operation Smile is a children's medical charity that performs safe, effective cleft lip and cleft palate surgery.

According to Jason Sive, director at Operation Smile, both teams include cleft surgeons, anaesthesiologists, paediatricians, orthodontists, nurses, biomedical technicians, speech pathologists, dentists and child care providers. There will be five operating tables running per mission and the objective is to perform 125 surgeries per mission site in the week.

Tough life

"In many of the African countries, kids born with a cleft are ostracised, don't go to school, and live a very tough life," says Sive. "A cleft lip surgery takes 45 minutes, while a cleft palate surgery as little as 90 minutes. That's one football game, and a child's life is changed forever. Every three minutes a child is born with a cleft lip or palate, somewhere in the world. Children born with a cleft struggle to feed, and some don't live to see their first birthday."

For the DRC mission, we estimate we will screen more than 300 patients in Kinshasa and 180 in Lubumbashi. "In most cases, we are unable to fit all patients onto the operating lists. As a result, we keep going back to operate on those who never made the list on the previous mission," says Sive.

Operation Smile expanded its reach to the DRC in 2009. Since then, the organisation has conducted eight medical missions in the DRC, providing medical evaluations for 2,499 patients and free life changing surgery for 1,109 Congolese children and adults. During the inaugural mission, 555 evaluations were provided and 215 patients received free surgery.

Medical training

Operation Smile provided free surgery to 39 patients with only four remaining incontinent after surgery. It has also arranged medical trainings for hospital staff and medical students, including basic life support (BLS). To date, these medical programmes have benefited more than 250 health care professionals in the DRC.

"In SA, Operation Smile has operated on over 300 children. In September there is a mission in Mbombela, where we anticipate providing cleft surgery to another 100 kids. These missions are incredibly important, as these kids simply don't have access to this type of surgical treatment within their own countries," concludes Sive.

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