

CORRECTIVE SURGERY

Putting smiles on young faces

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THE Smile Week initiative will be giving the gift of smiling to 20 children born with facial conditions.

Thesele Mpiriane, whose 6-month-old daughter Lewatle was born with a unilateral cleft lip and palate, said she only found out about her baby's condition after she was born.

A cleft lip and palate are an opening or split in the upper lip, the roof of the mouth, palate or both.

She said when her baby was tiny it was initially scary, as her head was small with the cleft taking over most of her face.

"I was so shocked, thinking the baby does not have anything but eyes and ears, but then I saw her smile and I thought 'that's not so bad'. She loves to smile all the time, so I took this as a challenge from God.

"It wasn't tough to get through the first few months as I had support from the church. You panic internally, but outwardly you still need to be a parent, so I would simply say I forgot to panic."

Of the operation, Mpiriane said she was anxious for her baby to be operated on as she had already fallen in love with her "as is", and felt she had also been given a sign by God before her birth.

The mother of two said four weeks before her daughter was born, she had heard a radio show about the condition and how it came about, its extremities, and how to treat it.

"I think God was giving me the heads-up for what I was about to face, for me to be listening to the radio on that particular day and actually listen attentively to what was being said."

Kim Robertson Smith, CEO of the Smile Foundation, said the campaign started 21 years ago after then-president Nelson Mandela received a letter from a mother who desperately needed help with her daughter, who suffered from Möbius syndrome.

Möbius syndrome is a rare congenital neurological disorder characterised by facial paralysis and the inability to move the eyes from side to side. Most people with Möbius syndrome are born with complete facial paralysis and cannot close their eyes or form facial expressions.

Smith said Mandela approached Marc Lubner to assist, however they found there was no one in South Africa who could perform the surgery. As a



THESELE Mpiriane with her 6-month-old daughter Lewatle, who was born with a unilateral cleft lip and palate. | OUPA MOKOENA African News Agency (ANA)

result, the pair ended up getting surgeons from overseas to come and train South African doctors in how to do the procedure, and that was how the Smile Foundation came about.

She said since then the foundation had performed surgeries in 11 academic hospitals on 4 000 children, with them organising the surgeries, providing psychosocial support, speech therapy and access to dieticians.

"We have all the psychologists, maxillofacial surgeons and medical teams, all to work with the children and make sure we can get them smiling again."

According to Smith, there was a backlog of surgeries in South Africa which had been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

With 1 in 700 children being born with a cleft lip and palate, she said that

through the initiative they were conducting a whole week of compressed surgeries. They brought in six children every day for surgeries.

This past month, the organisation has conducted the campaigns in Bloemfontein and Kimberley, ending with operations at Dr George Mukhari Academic Hospital. The organisation is conducting operations on 20 children this week at the hospital as part of the smile week campaign.

For April, Smith said they would be moving the initiative to the Johannesburg academic hospitals and then to East London.

"It's exciting for parents as they have been on the waiting list for quite some time, and the surgeries work the better for the child when they are younger, as you can't talk and you battle to eat or suck properly."



AT LEAST 20 children are being operated on as part of the Smile Foundation Smile Week initiative at Dr George Mukhari Academic Hospital. | OUPA MOKOENA African News Agency (ANA)