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Smile Week transforms Kouga baby's life

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EIGHT-MONTH-OLD Asenathi from Humansdorp had her life changed last week when she underwent surgery at Port Elizabeth Provincial Hospital to correct a severe bilateral cleft lip.

The procedure, performed by Dr Chris van der Walt, was a success — and as the infant was wheeled out of theatre, relief washed over her mother's face.

The operation formed part of a landmark three-day surgical initiative hosted by the Smile Foundation from 25 to 27 March, marking the final "Smile Week" for van der Walt after 16 years of service that has transformed the lives of more than 500 children.

Speaking shortly after surgery, the head of plastic surgery at the hospital said the programme remains as vital as ever.

"We have 19 patients booked," said van der Walt.

"This morning, we did the little baby with the bilateral cleft. It is quite a deformity to have, and everything went very well with the child, so I'm sure the parents are going to be very ecstatic."

Little Asenathi, whose condition had affected her ability to feed and smile, was safely in her mother's arms after the more than two-hour procedure.

Her mother, Ondela Ndudula, described the emotional toll of the experience.

"I was very nervous, and I was shaking, especially during the surgery, but now, after they came out of theatre, I'm just very happy," she said. "There is a big difference after surgery because her lip was open before, born like that, and now it is closed. I'm just so happy."

Van der Walt's final Smile Week signals a transition, rather than a complete departure. After 25 surgical outreach weeks, he plans to step back from leadership while continuing to support services at the hospital.

"We all make work decisions and I'm at the stage where I decided to career out," he said.

"This is my primary passion and love of plastic surgery, so I have already been approached by the hospital and, with mutual agreement, I will still continue to do sessions at the hospital.

Ondela Ndudula with her eight-month-old daughter, Asenathi, and Dr Chris van der Walt.
PHOTO: NATASHA BEZUIDENHOUT

"We will continue to offer support for the children. The clinical services will remain, but there is a need for someone new to take things forward, especially with academic development."

Despite stepping back, van der Walt said that cleft care in the province cannot be interrupted — particularly given the severe shortage of specialists.

"This kind of surgery is highly specialised," he explained. "I happen to have a passion for it, but unfortunately, I'm the only plastic surgeon who does this in the whole Eastern Cape, so I can't not assist these children.

"It's quite frightening to think about it. The Eastern Cape is the second biggest province in South Africa, and we have one person doing this. We have to look beyond what happens now — we have to look at future training."

He said efforts are underway to build capacity, though training remains complex.

"We are in the process of a training programme here, but it is not easy to train surgeons because it is such a specialised skill. If we can get it right, we will hopefully have more plastic surgeons joining the department in future."

Van der Walt's journey with the Smile Foundation began shortly after he arrived in the Eastern Cape 17 years ago.

"When I first came here from the Western Cape, the Smile Week initiative had just started there, and I was surprised it wasn't in the Eastern Cape," he recalled. "With management, we made the decision to host the first Smile Week in Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha) around 2010.

"We first had help from outside, and then within two years we were running the Smile Weeks on our own — that's how the transfer of skills happened, and before you know it, you do 25."

Beyond Gqeberha, he has also extended services to underserved areas, leading annual outreach teams to KuGompo City (formerly known as East London) over the past five years.

The significance of the programme extends far beyond surgery, said Smile Foundation COO Tshidi Chabane-Xaba.

"This is essential healthcare. Without surgery, children like Asenathi face feeding difficulties, social isolation and shattered futures.

"Dr van der Walt doesn't just operate; he helps give children the chance to live with confidence and dignity."

She added: "Dr van der Walt has shown up for 16 years with quiet dedication, exceptional skill, and genuine care for every child and family he encountered. What he has given cannot be captured only in surgeries or statistics — it lives on in people."

The surgery was supported by partners, including the Kouga Wind Farm.

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