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Page: 5

Stakeholders with Onalerona Ledwaba

Dimakatso Mathebe, Dorah Busang (Deputy Director of Nursing), Jane Mudau, and Aggi Mgxanga.

Reconstructive surgery marathon tackles cleft surgery backlog

Manna Maurice

Partnering with the Smile Foundation and the Vodacom Foundation, the Steve Biko Academic Hospital (SBAH) aimed to perform reconstructive surgery, including cleft lip and cleft palate procedures, on 15 children during the past Friday and Saturday.

A key focus of this Smile Weekend was the Academic Programme, led by Professor Solly Selahle, Head of Plastic and Reconstructive Department at SBAH, together with Professor Mzubanzi Mabongo, the head of the Department of Maxillo-Facial and Oral Surgery at the University of Pretoria (UP).

With extensive experience in the public health sector, Selahle and Mabongo are deeply committed to mentorship and the development of future surgeons.

Throughout the weekend, the professors worked closely with consultants and senior registrars, facilitating hands-on surgical training in cleft lip and cleft palate repair, procedures that require specialised skill and continuity of care.

"Developing surgical capacity within our public hospitals is essential. By training registrars in complex reconstructive procedures, we are not only helping the children on the operating list today, but empowering surgeons who will go on to treat many children over the course of their careers," said Selahle.

Dr Fatima Cotwall, Clinical Manager at SBAH, said this will change the lives of communities, patients and their families.

"Following this marathon, we will have no backlog regarding cleft lip and cleft palate procedures. We will continue our partnership on a need-to-operate basis. We want to thank Vodacom, Smile Foundation, and all stakeholders as we continue to put a smile on many children's faces," Dr Cotwall said.

Tshidi Chabane-Xaba of the Smile Foundation highlighted the importance of combining patient care with professional development.

"Smile Weekends allow us to create impact that lasts beyond a single operation. While children receive life-changing surgery, we are building long-term surgical capacity within our public hospitals, ensuring sustainable care for many more children in the years ahead," Chabane-Xaba said.

The Smile Foundation has been collaborating with the hospital for the past three years, organising weekly slates, leading to surgeries every Tuesday. With the help of donors, they have operated on over 5 300 children across the country.

Chabane-Xaba said the partnership is beneficial to the children of Pretoria, and it benefits all those involved.

"The operation is done today, but this is a life-changing surgery for the child. It will help them with their speech, it will help them with their schooling, as opposed to being moved to a special needs school because the child has a speech impediment."

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