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Magic of healing overshadowed by Eastern Cape's lack of specialist surgeons

Smile Week brings hope to 19 children in Gqeberha

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Hope and healing have again taking centre stage in Gqeberha as the Smile Foundation launched its 16th Smile Week at Port Elizabeth Provincial Hospital, bringing life-changing surgery to 19 children over three days.

The annual programme focuses on reconstructive procedures for conditions such as cleft lip and cleft palate, helping restore not only children's smiles but also essential functions such as eating, breathing and speech.

For many families, the initiative offers access to specialised care that would otherwise be out of reach.

Leading the surgical team is plastic surgeon Dr Chris van der Walt, currently the only specialist in the province performing these procedures within the public health sector.

Van der Walt has participated in more than 25 Smile Week initiatives but maintains that he does not keep count because he does each surgery with passion and care.

"Earlier this morning, we operated on a little girl with a bilateral cleft lip, which is quite a severe deformity affecting both sides of the lip," he said.

"It's a very impactful condition to see, but the surgery went extremely well, and I'm confident her parents will be overjoyed with the outcome."

Among the patients is eight-month-old Asenathi Ndudula, who was the first to undergo surgery for a bilateral cleft condition.

Her mother, Ondela, 32, was not able to hold back her emotions. "This is such a great moment," she said.

"I had already accepted my child, and that people will always talk negatively about her.

"But now I know that she will have a normal life, and I couldn't be happier."

While the programme continues to deliver transformative results, concerns have emerged about its long-term sustainability.

Van der Walt, who is preparing to step down from his position, has highlighted the urgent need for more trained surgeons to continue the work.

"I am resigning, but because I have a primary passion and love for plastic surgery and the work that I do with the Smile Foundation, I will continue doing sessions at the hospital," he said. "At present I am the only plastic surgeon providing this service in the Eastern Cape, which is quite daunting when you consider the size of the province.

"As the second-largest province in SA, having a single centre and one specialist offering these procedures highlights the urgent need for more resources.

"Until then, we remain committed to continuing this essential service for the children who need it.

"I will be happy to assist and teach the next person."

Van der Walt said there was a big shortage of plastic surgeons and specialists at the moment because many of them went overseas for training and did not return.

"The truth of the matter is we need the department of health to get involved and assist in training plastic surgeons," he said.

"We have two of them who only have two years left of their training.

"If the government can help them with their out-of-province training, they can come back and take over."

The foundation has emphasised the importance of collaboration in making the programme possible.

Chief operations officer Tshidi Chabane-Xaba said the surgeries were necessary due to the long-term positive impact they had on the patients.

"The work that we do here is very important and we have seen the positive impact that the surgeries can have on people," Chabane-Xaba said.

"We have seen at the clinics when the moms hide their babies.

"These surgeries contribute to the children's futures. Their lives are forever changed after the surgery.

"Some may even grow up and help others in the same way that they were helped.

"This is what we aim to do through the Smile Foundation."

Plastic surgeon Dr Chris van der Walt with proud mother Ondela Ndudula and her eight-month-old daughter, Asenathi Ndudula, the first of 19 children to receive cleft surgery through the Smile Foundation's 16th Smile Week Picture: FREDLIN ADRIAAN

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