

## ‘Smile Pinki’ and Cleft Lips & Palates

A couple of days back *The Smile Train* documentary Smile Pinki was nominated for an Oscar!

The star of the film is Pinki is a beautiful little 6 year old living in Eastern UP. The film follows Pinki from her quite life of desperation with a horrific cleft, through free cleft surgery at a Smile Train partner hospital to her incredible transformation and triumph as she is allowed to attend school a month later for the first time in her life.

What are cleft lips and palates?

Not many know that a cleft – or a gap – in the upper lip and/or palate is one of the commonest birth defects among humans. While the exact causes are still a medical mystery, the cleft results from the failure of the foetal tissue and bone to fuse and close together during the tenth to twelfth week of pregnancy.

It is estimated that one child in every 700 is born with this. For India, this translates into over 35,000 babies born *each year* with this defect.

Though ‘normal’ in every other sense, because of the grotesque facial deformity and speech impairment, children born with clefts are condemned to grow up as virtual social outcasts. That is, if they are allowed to grow up at all. Many such kids - especially girls - are killed at birth or abandoned. Orphanages are full of them. But even when they are allowed to live, their families are ashamed of them, other children taunt them and most schools won’t accept them. Even if they manage to get some basic education, they cannot find jobs, get married or join the mainstream of society.

Any birth defect is tragic; ask a parent who has experienced the pain and agony. But a cleft lip or palate is perhaps the most tragic of them all because it is one of the few that can be corrected, *and yet isn’t*. The ‘treatment’ for clefts – in the form of surgical repair has been around for decades. With proper medical interventions at the right time this birth defect can be *completely* corrected. There are few procedures that can change a child’s life as quickly and as dramatically as cleft surgery. Sadly, the only reason why over 50% clefts remain untreated in poor countries is poverty. “What most people don’t realize is that clefts are really much more of an economic problem than a medical one,” says Dr. Subodh Kumar Singh a leading plastic surgeon at G.S. Memorial Hospital in Varanasi.

And most national governments do not even recognize clefts as a disability!



**Karthik**

*The Smile Train* is a global charity committed to changing all that. Its overriding goal is make safe and quality treatment of cleft lip and palate accessible *free of cost* to the millions of children in developing countries who cannot afford it.

But, instead of bringing in surgeons and other medical people from the West, it work *only* with local doctors – training, helping and empowering them to become self-sufficient. Through a fair and totally transparent but highly rigorous process of screening, *The Smile Train* credentials hospitals and surgeons who deliver safe, quality treatment to such children – totally free. To date over 160 hospitals and more than 250 surgeons have been credentialed, and from the time it started (late 2000), *The Smile Train* has sponsored over 150,000 surgeries in India.

*The Smile Train* aims not just to put smiles on the faces of kids that have never known one, but to give them a second chance at life

Award-winning director Megan Myhlan has created a fantastic film that captures all of the tragedy, desperation, poverty, emotion, fear, relief, amazement and hope that are part of every smile train patient's journey. This film shows how easy it is to give a desperate child not just a new smile but a second chance at life!

That's very nice you're thinking - *but how is an Oscar going to help anyone?*

Well, if we would be so lucky to win an Oscar, here is how it would change the lives of 10 lakh children in India...

1. We are trying to take Pinki to Hollywood for the Oscar night. If she and her parents manage to get passports and US visas – and if our film should win, little 6 year old Pinki will go on stage in front of 900 million viewers and accept the Oscar on behalf of the more than 4 million children in the world who are still waiting for the life-changing surgery she received. She will raise the statue (if it is not too heavy) and say “I accept this award on behalf of the 4 million children who were not so lucky as I as, who are crying themselves to sleep every night, waiting and wondering if anyone is ever going to come along and help them. PLEASE help us help these children.”

2. If we win, Pinki will go on all the TV shows like The Today Show, Entertainment Tonight, Dateline, etc. and she will be in all the newspapers and magazines like The New York Times, and USA TODAY, People Magazine, Parade, etc. she will be a fantastic 6 year old spokesperson for a problem that nobody knows about and few people care about.

3. By winning an Oscar, this documentary will be distributed all across America and the world and seen by tens of millions of people who can help us solve the problem of clefts. HBO is already calling us!

How can YOU help us get an Oscar for Smile Pinki?

1. Go to YouTube right now and watch the ‘Smile Pinki’ trailer. Leave a comment!
2. Forward this email to everyone you know asking them to go to YouTube too and to forward this email to everyone they know. If everyone helps, this e mail could reach more than a million people!

And write down the date in your diary: Monday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>. The Oscars begin at 9.30 am IST.

Imagine what it would feel like to watch little Pinki climb up onto that stage and know that you helped get her there!

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? Please write to me at [skalra@smiletrain.org](mailto:skalra@smiletrain.org). Meantime please also visit us at [www.smiletrainindia.org](http://www.smiletrainindia.org) and [www.smiletrain.org](http://www.smiletrain.org)

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