

'OPERATION SMILE' – Guwahati, India 19th – 27th May 2009



In December last year, Mr Per Hall Consultant Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon went to Ethiopia to perform, cleft lip and palate surgery as part of a medical mission with Operation Smile.

Operation Smile is a charity established in 1982 by Dr William Magee and his wife Kathy. Its main aim is to perform free operations for cleft lip and palate, with the help of medical and non-medical volunteers, in countries where such an operation is unavailable to the poor and needy.

When Per came back from Ethiopia he talked about his experiences and the impact it had on him. His talk inspired me to apply to Operation Smile so that I could join as a volunteer. I work as a scrub nurse in plastic surgery and on the cleft palate theatre lists at Addenbrookes and I felt I had skills to contribute. With my application approved I went on my first Operation Smile mission to Guwahati, India on the 19th May. It was a 10-day mission. I had to look it up and discovered that it is in Assam.



Per was also going to Guwahati and I was delighted to be going on the mission with him as part of a team. Team Guwahati as they called us had about 77 volunteers, not counting the many translators and the ground team who helped to run the mission.

We hit the ground at Guwahati to discover that it was the hot and rainy season. On day one, the Operation Smile team walked to the hospital at 6.30 a.m. Families were seated under the marquee and many more in the hot sun just waiting for a chance for their child to be operated on.

Several stations were set up and patients were seen by a variety of Operation Smile volunteers: doctors, anaesthetists, paediatricians, speech therapists, dentists and image technicians who work together to determine each patient's readiness to undergo the operation. After two days of screening we had about 200 patients ready for surgery. I took with me, numerous boxes of crayons and gave them to the Child Life volunteers whose job it was to keep the children entertained while waiting at the different stations.



Per Hall with a patient

It was heaven to discover that the operating theatres were air-conditioned! In temps that were 36-42 degrees Celsius it was the best place to be. I must say that we were looked after very well by the local hospital team, as well as by the medical staff volunteers. There was plenty of sweet cinnamon tea to go round, lunch arrived on time and we even had the luxury of doughnuts and pastries one day. However, the combination of heat, stress and work, inevitably made several people ill and a mission like this certainly tested my stamina and endurance levels.



The Multinational Theatre Nurses (Anne with the scarf)

I understand from the feedback from Operation Smile, Guwahati that 226 patients in total had their surgery. It was a success story.

For me personally, I found the first two days difficult to cope with. I have never seen so many needy people waiting to be given the life changing chance of an operation for their child or for themselves. Some of the lip repairs were done on adults. The expectant sea of faces, which carried awe and reverence for the Operation Smile team, had a great impact on me. It was very moving and it made me very tearful. However, I realised that being there to help with the operations was the best gift I could give to these people and in return the immeasurable reward for me was to see and experience the joy, the smiles and the conveying of gratitude by the patients and their parents.

There are about 30,000 unrepaired cleft lips and palates in Assam, India. We only made a tiny dent in that number. There are many ways volunteers can contribute and get involved with Operation Smile.

Their website www.operationssmile.org.uk has comprehensive information about how anyone can get involved and contact details for those who want to join the volunteer programmes.

As someone once said;

“A smile can brighten the darkest day”. Operation Smile certainly does that for hundreds of people around the world.

Operation Smile Volunteer 2009
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