

“Operation New Smile”

Rows of Indian mothers and children sat silently for hours, their beseeching eyes following the doctors who, they prayed, would change their lives. This was the sight that awaited three Israeli physicians when they arrived in Huancayo, a small town in the Peruvian Andes. The women who sat in the tiny hospital waiting area surrounded by children of all ages, all suffering from some variation of cleft lip/palate disorder, had never heard of Israel. But they had arrived from many miles away because they knew their last hope from a life as outcasts lay in the hands of Dr. Eyal Winkler and his medical team, Dr. Yitzchak Zilinsky and Dr. Yigal Shochat, plastic surgeons from Israel's Sheba Medical Center.

Cleft lip/palate is a birth defect in which either the lip or the palate or both fail to close in the womb, leaving a separation that can affect eating, speech, and hearing. The congenital deformity causes failure in facial development during pregnancy. It occurs in different grades of severity, which are divided into two major categories: cleft lip (hare lip or hair lip) and cleft palate.

In Israel and the West, surgery to correct these deformities is common and occurs early in a child's life. A child born with cleft lip will be treated by the age of 10 to 20 weeks, and with a cleft palate by the age of 18 to 24 months. Because of the important role of the palate in speech and in eating, it is considered critical to correct the deformity early in order to allow a child to develop normally.

“Nobody's really sure of the gene that causes it or the surrounding conditions that lead to it. It might be both,” explains Winkler. “You do see more cleft lip or cleft palate kids among alcoholic women for example. But nobody really understands it.”

The mission to Huancayo, in the Peruvian Andes, was the sixth cleft lip/palate mission to the developing world for Sheba Medical Center personnel. Winkler



Dr. Eyal Winkler examines a young patient as a concerned mother looks on

has been leading the Sheba team since 1998, when Interplast, an international organization providing free reconstructive surgery for people in developing nations, asked the hospital to join them on a mission to Katmandu, Nepal.

After the Nepal mission, Winkler and Sheba administrators decided that they wanted to operate these missions on their own. As hospital CEO, Dr. Ze'ev Rothstein, explains, “our policy is to extend help wherever it is needed.”

So they created ‘Operation New Smile’ — with the goal of providing needed plastic surgery and medical care in the Third World.

Operation New Smile's mission hinges on creating cooperative relationships with doctors and medical technicians in the countries where they work.

In the Third World there are thousands or maybe tens of thousands of kids, nobody really knows, that are both born undiagnosed prenatally with cleft lip/palate problems and that do not receive treatment.

Operation New Smile is doing what it can to change that. In 1999, the Sheba delegation traveled to Haiphong, Vietnam on their first ‘Smile’ mission, two plastic surgeons, a pediatrician and an anesthesiologist. They worked 12 hours a day for a week, operating on babies and toddlers up to three years old. In the end, they operated on between 30 to 50 children suffering from cleft lip/palate.

The team's first emergency intervention came at the end of 2001. A fire, most likely caused by makeshift fireworks, broke out in the Mesa Redonda ▶

section of Lima, Peru. Hundreds of people were killed and hundreds more disfigured in the chaos. The Peruvian government appealed for help, and Israel sent Winkler and a colleague to Lima immediately.

"We packed some bandages, some ointments, some knives and started our long way to Peru. We were there within 72 hours of disaster. And we found ourselves in one of the hospitals working hard with the [local] team, shoulder to shoulder," recalls Winkler. He and colleague, Dr. Joseph Haik, now head of Sheba's Burn Unit, worked with the Peruvian doctors and medical staff for approximately ten days, treating hundreds of patients.

Peruvian president, Alejandro Toledo and his wife Eliane Karp de Toledo were extremely grateful for the doctors' work, thanking them publicly in a press conference and taking them on a private helicopter ride above the Andes. First Lady Eliane de Toledo had spent several years living in Israel, and when Winkler told her about Operation New Smile's work with cleft lip/palate children she offered to help them set up missions in Peru. The group has done three subsequent cleft lip/palate missions to Peru, two to the Amazonian region of Peru in 2001 and 2004, and the most recent to Huancayo in 2006.

Funding for the missions comes from wherever Winkler and the hospital can find it — occasionally the doctors pay out of their own pockets. Sheba offers the doctors the time off and the surgical instruments they bring with them and leave behind for their colleagues in the countries they visit.

"We try to always bring stitches, suturing material, and surgical instruments," explains Winkler. "That's our highest level of donation."

As Israelis, Winkler believes the missions overseas serve another important purpose. "We feel that we are the real ambassadors of Israel," he declares.

The missions can be an emotional roller coaster even for the experienced surgeons. In Huancayo, they met a three month old baby with a major cleft palate that they believed likely had some brain damage. "He was dehydrated and mal-

nourished," describes Winkler sadly. The surgeons knew there was nothing they could do for him, for he was too weak to survive the operation. "He has probably already died."

But there are also the children for whom the treatment can mean a whole new life. In Huancayo, they met a ten-year-old boy called "Onze" or eleven in Spanish. He had gained this nickname because of an eleventh finger. The boy also had a cleft lip.

"He was hidden by parents, never brought to parties as a child," explains Winkler. "And when he went to school, everybody laughed at him because he had a tiny finger coming out of first finger."

The team operated on Onze, removing the extra finger and correcting the cleft lip.

"The first time he saw himself in the mirror he started weeping. His parents acted like we were Jesus Christ coming the save them, they called us savior, savior," says Winkler, obviously moved by the experience.

It's making this kind of a difference in

the lives of people around the world that makes Winkler and the Sheba team eager to organize more missions.

At the end of the week, mothers, and children are weeping, crying and falling on our legs. Kissing us. This is something irreplaceable; I mean no money in the world can buy. And after you experience it once, you always want to come back, no matter how hard it is," explained Winkler.

For Winkler, the work of helping those in need abroad is also critical in spreading an important message to those at home, his three children ages 13, ten and one.

"They can't wait to be old enough to join me," explains the proud father. "They prepare pictures for the kids, they prepare presents to send, they give them toys they've never touched for them to play with. And I feel that this is the most important aspect of the trips. It's raising kids into a giving atmosphere."

"I think when you see such poverty you learn the value of the life you lead. You have to thank G-d for the abundance that we have." ■

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