

CamSmile Update on Ethiopian Cleft and Plastic Surgery



The new hospital in Jimma. The shell is built – everyone is desperate to get in and use it.

In March 2015 I spent 2 weeks back in Jimma University Specialised Hospital, Ethiopia. This is part of a planned regular presence of Plastic and Cleft Surgeons visiting Jimma to keep the training program going and to inspire and select young Ethiopian surgeons to specialise in Plastic and Cleft Surgery.

I caught up with Dr Daniel and Dr Yonas. They are both experienced General Surgeons with whom I have worked over the last 2 years and, because of their passion to learn, we have set up a 3 year training program in Plastic and Cleft Surgery. From the end of May they will be living in Taiwan where they will spend 18 months learning all aspects of Plastic and Reconstructive surgery with a special emphasis on modern microsurgical reconstructive techniques. After that they will spend 6 months in Guwahati in Northern India at the Operation Smile Centre which last year performed 3000 cleft procedures before returning to Ethiopia and the new hospital in Jimma which is tantalisingly close to being ready for work.

We had a tour of the new hospital and I include a view from the top where the staff restaurant will be showing the scale of this new hospital and a picture of me with Dr Yonas Eshetu who is one of our rising stars.



Per with Yonas at the top of the new hospital in Jimma

This year I worked with a team of 6 people. 2 Anaesthetists from the US, 2 Kenyan nurses and 2 logistics people. Every case we did was done, as much as possible, by the Ethiopian doctors. The anaesthetists were training 3 future consultant anaesthetist for Ethiopia (there are only 15 Consultant Anaesthetists for the whole of Ethiopia – 2 in Jimma – 40 or so at Addenbrookes!). I was pleased to work for the second year running with a very skilled general surgeon called Ruhama. She graduated this year as a fully trained general surgeon and has gifted hands. Also a second year General Surgical resident, Tilahun, joined us. He absolutely loved working in Plastic Surgery and Cleft.

From a numbers point of view we did 19 Cleft lip operations (I did 2 as the main surgeon – the rest were all teaching cases with me helping. I did all 5 of the cleft palates and then between us we did 7 cases of burn scar revisions to help with function and a reconstruction of the nose after an exotic tropical disease called Leishmaniasis which had made unsightly holes in a beautiful young girls nose.

We had a visit from a baby whom we had seen last March. The parents brought her back because I wanted to check her palate as she had a minor cleft palate (Submucous Cleft Palate) and I wanted to know if there was any noticeable problem with the speech as she might need an operation if that is the case. I was struck by how beautiful this little girl was and then got goose bumps when I realised that actually she had a repaired cleft lip which was so good I did not notice it until I was examining the palate! The goose bumps grew when I dug back through last years photos and found that Ruhama had done the Operation with Yonas helping her! I was pleased to get a photo of all of them together to celebrate that this is what its all about.



Same baby March 2014 before surgery by Ruhama, assisted by Yonas using the method I had taught Yonas in 2013.



A beautiful baby returns to see us. March 2015



The proud mother and the wonderful surgeons.

The future for Jimma is very exciting. From January 2016 a young surgeon, trained in Plastic Surgery, will commence working in Jimma. We hope that he will be able to select another 2 surgeons to follow Yonas and Daniel in their 3 year out of country training program and return to make the unit at least 5 Plastic Surgeons by March 2019.

Jimma University Hospital will serve a population of 15 Million people for South West Ethiopia. That's 3 times the population served by the Birmingham Cleft Team so we expect they will be treating around 300-350 patients with Cleft Lip and Palate per year.

Already we are seeing the impact of being there regularly as we are no longer seeing adults with Cleft lips – we probably have repaired a significant proportion of them. We are now seeing children and babies – some who are too young to offer surgery to and need rebooking for our next team in November! We have been able to rescue babies who are struggling to feed and get them introduced to the nutrition team at the hospital so they can survive and grow ready for their surgery next time.

The University Hospital we hope will open soon but will need help with equipment. Other than Cleft lip and Palate sets and general Plastic Surgical instruments we need to find our returning surgeons an Operating Microscope so they can perform modern microsurgical reconstructions for wound such as from trauma to the limbs (saving amputations after Road Traffic Accidents, restoring function in burns) and after cancer surgery to the Head and Neck and chest (say after breast cancer surgery). In fact, in Cambridge, we use the operating microscope to do all palate surgery also and I hope to be able to teach the Ethiopian surgeons to use the microscope for more detailed and careful palate surgery. To this end I am liaising with the Zeiss Medical Microscope company – based in Cambridge to see if we can get a reconditioned Microscope after any UK hospital upgrades their microscopes. This might be an ambitious target but we wait to hear about potential costs.

Thanks to CamSmile I was able to donate 2 Textbooks of Plastic Surgery to Dr Daniel and Dr Yonas for which they are very grateful. They have been reading them in readiness to set off for Taiwan. Once they are in Taiwan we will hear from them and I will update you on their progress.