

JANNE SPEIRS - MY VISIT TO AN OPERATION CLEFT SURGICAL CAMP IN DHAKA FEBRUARY 2017

My interest in and passion for Bangladesh goes back to my father who, for most of my teenage years was a Baptist Mission Administrator for the mission stations in Asia, and who became passionate about the then East Pakistan on his first visit in 1963. Later he became a Rotarian and District Governor in 1986-1987 for the then District 950 in South Australia.

Therefore, when my husband Charles was training to become a District Governor for District 9820 for 2014-2015, my immediate reaction was to combine my partner's project and two of my Dad's main loves – Rotary and Bangladesh (my father had passed away only eight months previously). When, at our training sessions in Parramatta, Michael Kirk spoke about Operation Cleft, I decided to use this most worthy cause as my project during Charlie's year as District Governor.



For those of you who are reading this without much knowledge of the project itself, Operation Cleft started as an international project of the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central in D9810 some 11 years ago. Operation Cleft provides free cleft repair

surgery in surgical camps at a range of hospitals across Bangladesh, using local surgeons and other surgical team staff. This life-altering repair surgery, affording the *Gift of a Smile for Life*, is provided free of charge to those underprivileged and unable to afford the treatment under normal funding. Moinul Islam, a quite remarkable young man, runs the logistics and day to day operations from Dhaka and does a brilliant job, and reports to the Operation Cleft Australia Board, made up of members of the Box Hill Central Rotary Club.

In these 11 years, over 10,700 children and babies in Bangladesh have had this surgery to correct what, in Australian babies, would be repaired as a matter of

course. These cleft conditions left untreated, especially in rural communities of Third World countries, would lead to a very difficult life for these children. The D9820 donations were generous during Charlie's year, and I have maintained a relationship with the group since then. So upon notifying Operation Cleft I would be in Dhaka in early February, their in-country team invited me and my friend, Jenny, to attend their 60-patient operation surgical camp at Dhaka City Hospital under the guidance of Professor Bari and his team.



Some families travelled for more than 11 hours (that may have been as little as 150kms!!) to give their children the opportunity for a full and "normal" life. There was a wide range of ages and severities, as well as those who were at the camp for

finishing work on previous surgeries already performed. It was a humbling and very moving experience to be a part of such a fantastic day. I must admit, I had to stop and take a deep breath as I entered the waiting room as it was just a mass of people – kids all dressed in their best and just so much hope in the eyes of the carers. The atmosphere was quiet and dignified, except when the mothers thought it quite funny that their children were terrified of us. Obviously, not many strange, white women come their way.

It must be a daunting prospect for a parent to give their very special child to a stranger to be taken away for surgery, not really knowing what to expect – bearing in mind, some of them were as young as six months old. Remember also that we are talking about rural villagers here rather than city dwellers. For many of them, I would imagine that coming to Dhaka would be daunting, let alone coming into this very different

environment. In my mind, this is an example of just how much these parents care about their children and how willing they are to do whatever it takes to give them a better chance in life.



While at the surgical camp, I endeavoured to stay hands off, but in the end, as I've always been drawn to babies, I just had to get some cuddles. Although my self-esteem took a battering with their reactions - I'm not used to babies being scared

of me - I did get lovely cuddles from one gorgeous little dot - an absolute little doll, just six months old and so beautiful. She buried her face in my neck and cuddled and was obviously trying to crawl as she would try to walk up my chest at the same time. Then her head would lift off my shoulder, and the most stunning smile would erupt on her face!!! I was ready to run off with her and laughingly turned away from mum (who had some English) and said I was going. She and the other mums thought it was great fun. Mum was quite stunning as well and had the most beautiful, playful and loving relationship with her daughter!! I have already requested some 'after' photos!

At the other end of the spectrum, a poor lad with a long way to go was also there with his mum, who looked older and very stoic and careworn but responsive to simple comments and grateful for her son to be given this opportunity. He could have been anywhere from 11-17 years old, but it was so hard to tell, as although he was obviously well into his treatment, his scars were still very noticeable - right from his lower eyelids to his

mouth on both sides, and so his face was very set and expressionless. I will also try to keep informed on how he is going as it would be lovely to see the end result, but, as I said, he still has a long way to go. Some people have asked me since I've been home, whether these children were ostracised or outcast because of their facial issues and I'm sure that must sometimes happen, at least in the wider community if not within the family. However, the children Jenny and I saw at this camp were obviously loved just like any other child by their parents. In a previous era, they may have been 'put to work' to get money for the family by using their cleft as a begging tool. The very fact that so many parents bring their children to the camps for repair surgery shows this to be a dying trend, which is just wonderful to see.



There is so much else I could say about this incredible opportunity. Jenny and I will never forget the welcome we received or the wonderful work we

witnessed being undertaken to help the rural and impoverished children of Bangladesh have one less hurdle to overcome in their lives. Thanks must go to Professor Bari, the local benefactors and media representatives, they all made us feel so welcome. It was a privilege to be welcomed by the families and allowed a small insight into their struggles and hopes. Thanks also to the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central for their vision and determination to keep the job going. Finally, we owe a huge thanks to Moinul, who looked after us so well, not just at the hospital but for our full stay in Dhaka.

Janne Speirs



An international project of the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central Inc District 9810 Australia



Name: _____

Address: _____ State _____ Postcode: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

I would like to make a **Monthly** donation of \$25 \$50 \$75 \$ _____ for 12 months*

OR I would like to make a donation of \$ _____.

*If ticked, the amount indicated will be charged to your credit card monthly for 12 months from first debit date.

I wish to pay by Cheque CreditCard Name on card: _____

Card Number: Expiry Date: / CVC

Signature: _____

Please send this coupon with your donation to: **Operation Cleft Australia Foundation** (ABN 36 063 471 446)

PO Box 631, Box Hill VIC 3128

Credit card and PayPal donations may also be made via our secure online payment facility at www.operationcleft.org.au
Operation Cleft Australia is a Public Ancillary Fund with DGR status. Deductions of \$2 or more are tax-deductible in Australia.