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Reconstructive Plastic Surgery in Ecuador: A reminder of things we often take for granted

By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

A smile is a wonderfully versatile facial expression. It can signal happiness, welcome, recognition, warmth or understanding. It promises friendship and invites conversation.

But what if you had been born with a cleft lip and palate in a country where reconstructive surgery is rarely an option, especially for children of poor families? What if your birth defect made it impossible not only for you to smile, but also to communicate easily and well with those around you?

That's what life has been like for many of the patients treated during my most recent medical mission to Ecuador with Community Cares for Kids. The program was started 13 years ago by Dr. Frank Collini, of Shavertown, PA. Each summer, a volunteer team of American doctors and nurses flies to Guayaquil, on the western coast of the country, to provide free medical care for residents who have little or no access to specialized reconstructive plastic surgery.

On this mission, our team included three plastic surgeons as well as nurses and translators. Together, we worked from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., dealing with a broad range of problems, including deformities of the hand, eyelids, ears, nose, lips and palates, as well as removal of surface tumors.

The good nature and appreciation of these patients is impossible to forget. Each has dealt with struggles most of us can barely imagine.

There was the case of Alexi Bonilla, a lovely 20-year-old woman, born with a cleft lip and palate. Alexi had been fortunate enough to have had surgery in the past to correct the defects. But that hadn't solved all her problems. An air passage remained open in her throat which meant that when she spoke, air passed up through her nose, making her speech so nasal she virtually could not be understood.

We performed a pharyngeal flap procedure to close off the air escape route. By the next day, she was already speaking much better.

This kind of reconstructive work is at the heart of plastic surgery...it was a wonderful opportunity to give something back, something that makes a genuine, lifetime difference for people who have very few choices.

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