



Australian Government



MEDIA RELEASE

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Australia partners with the Smile Foundation for the *Moebius Smile Week*

Umair, an 8-year old boy from Durban, has to tell people when he is happy, angry or sad. He suffers from a medical condition called Moebius Syndrome and therefore has no control over his facial muscles.

This week, his life will change forever. Umair is one of three children with Moebius Syndrome who will receive life-changing Facial Reanimation surgery during the Australian Government and Smile Foundation's Moebius Smile Week, held at the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital (CMJAH).

Moebius Syndrome is a congenital or trauma-related condition where facial expression is not possible. Worldwide, one in a million children suffer from this condition. In severe cases, there is absolutely no facial movement and those affected may need to hold their lips closed to eat. The complexity and length of the surgeries required to correct Moebius Syndrome make this type of medical intervention extremely expensive and therefore not accessible to many disadvantaged children in South Africa.

Speaking from CMJAH this morning, Moira Gerszt, Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Smile Foundation, said "it is heart-warming to know that the surgeries will save these children from a life of being bullied and rejected by their peers".

"Australia is proud to be supporting such life-changing surgeries, that will finally give these children the opportunity to smile", said the Australian High Commissioner to South Africa, HE Mr Graeme Wilson.

During his visit to CMJAH for *Moebius Smile Week*, Mr Wilson said Australia was pleased to be making these highly specialised procedures possible through a grant awarded to the Smile Foundation as part of the Australian High Commission's Direct Aid Program. Mr Wilson said that supporting health projects through the Direct Aid Program, a small grants scheme designed to assist community development organisations, was a small but important part of Australia's health-related development assistance.

"Australian health investments focus on proven interventions to save the lives of poor women and children, and support large-scale disease prevention, including vaccination and treatment. We work with national governments, civil society organisations and multilateral agencies to achieve this", Mr Wilson said.

Dr George Psaras, Smile Foundation's Co-Founder and Medical Director, will perform the three surgeries on 27, 29 and 31 May. Dr Psaras was the first surgeon in South Africa to learn the facial animation surgery technique required to correct Moebius Syndrome. He will be flying in from Europe to conduct the operations and he will concurrently run skills workshops with registrars and consultants from around the country. The Head of the Plastics and Reconstructive Department at Wits University, Professor Elias Ndobe, has also mobilised his team for *Moebius Smile Week* without hesitation.

The surgeries will occur at CMJAH under the supervision of the hospital's new CEO, Mrs Gladys Bogoshi. The support of Mrs Bogoshi and CMJAH has been welcomed by all departments and personnel involved in the project.

“It gives me great pleasure to have the opportunity to work with a team of dedicated health workers to improve the quality of these children's lives. This initiative would not have been possible without the help of our partners who regularly raise funds to ensure the success of the Smile Foundation programme. We are all looking forward to this momentous occasion and wish the three patients the best for their surgeries and recoveries,” said Mrs Gladys Bogoshi.

For media enquiries or more information about the Australian Direct Aid Program, please contact Natalie Mendelsohn on +27 -834093619, Will Butler on +27-124236188, will.butler@dfat.gov.au or see the website of the Australian High Commission in Pretoria at www.southafrica.embassy.gov.au

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About The Smile Foundation:

The Smile Foundation is a South African NGO that assists children with any type of facial conditions, to receive free corrective Plastic and Reconstructive surgery within South Africa. We help children who suffer from treatable facial abnormalities such as Cleft Lip and Palate, burn victims, Moebius syndrome (facial paralysis) and other conditions. We are currently based in 7 Academic Hospitals around South Africa. We are investing in the medical teams we work with, through a Skills Development programme, and we assist the hospitals by purchasing equipment for use by the Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. Our Chief Patron Nelson Mandela's wish is for us to assist as many children around South Africa as possible to alleviate the stigma attached to living with facial condition. For more information, contact the Smile Foundation on www.smilefoundation.co.za or 0861ASMILE. Make a donation today! Help put a smile on a child's face today! SMS "Smile" to 38413 to donate R10.