

Cleft Lip/Palate Treatment



It is estimated that in every 700 live births, one child will have a cleft deformity. In Tanzania, where an estimated 1,741,000 live births occur each year, approximately 2,500 children are born with cleft deformities annually.

What is cleft lip/palate?

Cleft lip and cleft palate are facial and oral malformations that occur very early in utero. A baby's lips form in the first four to seven weeks of pregnancy, while the palate forms during weeks six through nine. A cleft occurs if the tissues that make up the upper lip or palate do not join completely before birth, resulting in a physical split or separation of the two sides of the upper lip (cleft lip) and/or an opening in all or part of a baby's palate (cleft palate). Cleft lip/palate can affect other parts of a baby's face, including the nose, gums, forehead, eyes and cheeks, and result in complications such as a speech impediment, increased risk of ear infections, and disrupted tooth development. A child with a cleft deformity may also experience difficulties feeding, resulting in malnourishment or even death.

Fortunately, most cleft deformities can be fixed with a simple surgery. Since these surgeries are ideally performed within the first 18 months of a child's life, early identification and intervention is essential to successful healthy outcomes for children with cleft lip/palate.

CCBRT's Disability Hospital is at the forefront of treatment for Tanzanians with congenital cleft deformities, performing half of the cleft lip/palate surgeries in the country.

In partnership with Smile Train, CCBRT has worked to build capacity through its professional development trainings for surgeons on reconstructive surgery techniques used to correct cleft lip/palate. CCBRT also carries out awareness-raising efforts to dispel myths about cleft lip/palate, inform caregivers of the treatments available for children with cleft lip/palate, and publicize the availability of free assessment and surgery for all patients under age five.

Through these activities, CCBRT is leading Tanzania's campaign to treat cleft lip/palate and bring smiles to the faces of Tanzania's children.

Innovating to Increase Awareness and Access to Treatment

CCBRT is using innovative strategies and technology to increase awareness of treatments available for cleft lip/palate and improve access to treatments for poor and vulnerable patients, both near and far. In 2013, CCBRT partnered with one of Tanzania's leading telecommunication companies to send 46,000 SMS to Tanzanians living in rural areas, with information about treatment services for cleft lip/palate available at CCBRT's Disability Hospital in Dar es Salaam. This SMS campaign, conducted in April and May 2013, resulted in a drastic increase in the number of cleft/lip patients seen at CCBRT due to greater awareness of available treatment.



Through an extensive network of more than 1,000 trained ambassadors across the country, CCBRT is able to identify and reach cleft patients from all over Tanzania.

To ease the logistical and financial burdens of traveling to Dar es Salaam from rural Tanzania for life-changing treatment, CCBRT launched the *transportMYpatient* program in 2009. Once a patient is identified with cleft lip/palate, that patient may be eligible for free transportation to the hospital. Through *transportMYpatient*, the money is sent for a patient's transport to the hospital via M-PESA. On arrival to CCBRT, the patient receives treatment, meals and accommodation free of charge. Patients are treated at CCBRT and monitored post-operation, with follow-up appointments scheduled as needed. The introduction of this program saw an immediate 180% increase in annual cleft lip/palate operations at CCBRT, which has only continued to grow in subsequent years.

Through its commitment to innovative, tech-forward initiatives, CCBRT is expanding access to information and treatment that can change the lives of the many children living with cleft lip/palate throughout Tanzania.

The Future of Cleft Lip/Palate Treatment

In order to continue increasing access to high-quality, affordable, and effective cleft lip/palate treatment throughout Tanzania, CCBRT has identified the following priorities:

- **Continued financial support for cleft lip/palate surgeries, as well as the *transportMYpatient* program**
- **Additional professional development opportunities for nurses, doctors, and other CCBRT staff to ensure that CCBRT continues providing the highest level of care for cleft lip/palate patients**
- **Increased focus on capacity building throughout Tanzania, to improve rural healthcare workers' ability to assess and surgically repair cleft lip/palate**

CCBRT remains firmly committed to the future of cleft lip/palate treatment in Tanzania and to bringing more smiles to the faces of children throughout the country.