

Bringing smiles to kids

Important to correct cleft lip and palate at young age

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A SMILE goes a long way into shaping the future of a child. It helps him to make his first friend, fit in among his peers and slowly work his way into his future.

Realising the importance of it, the Pantai Group of Hospitals launched the *Gift of Smile* campaign in 2003 to help restore the smiles of Malaysian children born with cleft palate and lip through corrective surgery.

Cleft lip is a congenital defect in which there is a separation in the upper lip while a similar defect in the roof of the is known as a cleft palate.

Under the programme, a patient will be fully funded until the age of 18 and priority is given to families with more than one child, and have a household income of RM2,000 and below.

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme is also aimed at creating a greater awareness of the rectifiable birth defect among the Malaysian public.

Since the programme's inception, more than RM1mil has been raised and utilised for the corrective surgery, with the support of the public and corporate partners, Pantai Hospitals and ING Insurance.

More than 150 children have been effectively treated and many have undergone at least two operations before the age of one.

On average, each corrective procedure costs



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between RM4,000 and RM5,000.

The campaign, which is also one of McDonald's main CSR efforts through its Ronald McDonald Children's Charity (RMCC), is headed by cosmetic surgeon Dr Kim Tan.

"The idea is to get the young patient to look as normal as possible so that he or she can fit into society and lead a normal lifestyle.

"It is not a life-threatening situation but it is certainly life-changing," Tan said, adding that one in 600 newborn babies suffered from the condition in Malaysia.

Tan said children born with the condition suffered from low self-esteem and were inclined to shy away from the public.

"And, the condition isn't just cosmetic; these children may experience breathing difficulties, speech and hearing problems, trouble in swallowing food and drink, and facial growth impairments.

"So, if a child grows up with the condition, it is not good for his future," he said.

Comparing "before" and "after" operation

photographs of a toddler and a middle-aged man, Tan explained the urgent need to have the problem corrected while a patient was young.

"Look at both patients. They look normal but look at their eyes. The younger one has hopeful eyes with a bright future ahead of him, while the older one has lived through it, deprived of a normal life. He has sad eyes," Tan pointed out.

Tan added that the hospital planned to make the project accessible to children outside of the Klang Valley. Currently, Tan and his team of doctors have already started cleft lip clinic sessions in Sabah and Sarawak.

"Logistics is the main problem facing patients especially in Sabah and Sarawak. We plan to have more of these outreach clinics in both Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak," Tan said, adding that the medical centre would continue to partner RMCC for the project.

Tan said that as a provider of premier healthcare service, the hospital wanted to ensure the medical needs of the less fortunate were taken care of, especially those of children and the disabled.

"This is our way of giving back to society. Our corporate social responsibility has to be ethical and full of compassion," said Tan.

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Rectifiable birth defect: A file photo of a baby with cleft lip.

»It is not a life-threatening situation but it is certainly life-changing«

DR KIM TAN

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